



*(Editor's note: Most potentially dangerous professions have seen significant improvements in safety in recent decades—but not so much commercial fishing, which continues to have the highest fatality rate of any employment sector in the country. There is, on average, just about one death every month in Canadian waters. Being a deckhand is estimated to be 14 times more deadly than being a police officer. The following first-hand story illustrates just a single incident.)*

NECK HAWKINS PHOTOGRAPHY

# Iron men and all that ...

Next time you enjoy a plate of fish and chips, give some thought to how it got there

by Bill Coultas

## **My eyes blinked open. Still, everything was black.**

There was something different: I could feel it. That's often the case on a ship. The engine is like a heartbeat: always there but not noticed until it beats differently—or stops.

I closed my eyes again. Yes, something was different. The engine was revving up. The ship listed a bit. My inner ear compensated for the new equilibrium. A porcelain cup rattled and then noisily slid across the plastic surface of the nearby table. Instinctively I raised my body and put out my hand to catch the black mug in the black cabin; but the mug had stayed on the table's surface. My head fell back on the pillow. I searched for my reading light switch. Flick, flick, flick. No light. I searched for the bulb. When I touched it the light pulsed. I tightened the bulb in place.

My watch said 3:23 am.



“They must be hauling back another trawl load of fish...” I mused to myself. “I’ll get dressed and head up to the bridge.”

I was on board in a professional capacity, putting together a report on the fishing gear and fishing techniques of this vessel while it is operating off the Labrador coast.

I slid my legs over the side of the bunk. The ship lurched again. I noticed the mug caught up on the edge of the table. I grabbed it before it tipped on to the floor and put it in a wooden slot where it would be secure.

I began to dress, feeling again the intense vibration of the engine. I headed out of my cabin and ambled towards the galley for coffee.

“Good morning,” I mumbled to two deckhands holding hot mugs of coffee.

“Morning,” Alex responded.

“It’s very cold,” I said.

“Yes, yes, it’s very cold,” replied Alex. “Labrador is cold.”

Yes, the North Atlantic in November is very cold.

The two men were hard looking. Both had dirty blond hair, dirty blond beards. Their hands were dark and calloused. Alex stood easily six feet and had a nasty scar on the bridge of his crooked nose. Pat was also pretty tall, but he radiated a gentle presence—a pleasant contrast to Alex’s aggressive manner. Their fish-stained canvas jackets were covered by fish-stained nylon life jackets which have long ago lost their bright orange colour. I seriously wondered if these working life vests would hold them up if they did end up in the icy Labrador waters.

They impatiently finished their coffee.

“There is trouble with a large bag of fish floating in the water. We need to go out and attach a cable so it can be winched aboard for processing,” blurted one of the fishermen. The ship gave another lurch. They placed their mugs in the galley sink and were gone.

I took my coffee up to the bridge, and winked at the mate on watch. He gave me a cursory nod and waved me to the end of the bridge where there was an open door. I stepped out on to a platform where the frigid wind bit my face. The mate pointed down to the water where a large bag of fish floated on the ocean surface.

I saw the problem right away. They were having trouble getting a hook on to the bag so they could winch it on board. The mate had decided to lower two crewmen over the side. They would motor over, attach a towing cable and have a winch haul the large bag of fish on to the deck of the ship.

This was an enormous fish processing trawler; a round-the-clock operation. The crew numbered more than 100. This processing ship received bags of fish from nearby supplier trawlers. When these smaller fishing vessels caught a trawl load, they released it and attached it to a cable from the processing vessel. The large ship I was aboard accepted these bags of fish for processing.

They fish for three months straight, or until the hold was full. At this point it was half full: the fishing had been spotty.



DAN DOUGETTE

BIGSTOCK/EXPERIENCESW

## “The night shift went back to work, almost like nothing had happened”

The pressure was on. On any fishing vessel there’s always some pressure, but somehow on this ship the pressure seemed a lot higher than normal. I felt it everywhere, on deck, in the processing room, the meal plant, the engine room, the galley.

On the bridge too—especially on the bridge. The bridge of any vessel is mission control.

The officers control the speed, direction and position of the vessel. You can see pretty well all of the fishing activity from there. If one sees something amiss, the officer blasts his words on an intercom. Everyone hears. It’s a screechy intrusion that can electrify the nerve ends.

This night, the first mate was in charge and the second mate was also on the bridge. The captain was down below in his cabin; presumably asleep after putting in a long day.

The responsibility of being in charge weighed heavily on his shoulders. The captain was a grumpy-looking man (at least most of the time) with a fearsome temper. His high octave commands were electric. When he snapped an order his words could act like a taser.

He shouted at me once when he thought I was getting in the way. I avoided him as much as possible after that.

So, on this cold stormy night, I was glad to be on the bridge with the first mate as opposed to the captain. The first mate was in his mid-30s. He was an even-tempered man, but let everyone know who was in charge when he spoke.

We were looking towards the stern of the ship where two davit arms lifted a Zodiac raft out of its cradle. Just before it was to be raised any further, the two fishermen, Alex and Pat, stepped in the Zodiac. The raft swayed a bit as one of them began to start the outboard engine. Then the davit arms lifted the small boat a bit higher and out over the ship’s railing. There it was more exposed to the wind and swayed a little more violently.

The first mate commanded the second mate to increase speed and head in a more northerly direction. The bag of fish had drifted away a bit. The mate wanted to get closer before he ordered the Zodiac lowered.

As the ship headed into the strong wind it had a big affect on the Zodiac. The small boat seemed to raise noticeably and then bang down. It raised a second time and slammed down again. When that happened a third time a shackle connected to the holding cable broke open. In the blink of an eye the bow of the Zodiac was pointing skyward and the stern was pointing seaward. One crewman slid past the outboard motor and fell four storeys into the freezing ocean. As the second crewman



slid towards the stern he got hold of a rope, but within seconds lost his grip and also sailed through the air and into the freezing North Atlantic.

Frantically the first mate screamed: "Man overboard! Man overboard!"

The second mate slammed on a red button just above the barometer and a siren-like noise squealed. The first mate roared past me, down over the stairs and soon I could see him four decks below. His arms were going in all directions. He was shouting and running back and forth. Men appeared out of nowhere. Soon they were dragging another Zodiac from the fishing deck.

I was still on the bridge when the captain got there. He saw me and bellowed, "Get off the bridge!" I skipped down the stairs two at a time and soon found myself on the deck with the other crew members.

Meanwhile the captain switched on a huge searchlight. Minutes before, we could see the two fishermen floating in the ocean but now they were gone. The searchlight methodically danced over the ocean top. Still no sign of them. Then a man on deck yelled out, pointing in a sideways direction. The searchlight turned dramatically and highlighted the men. They were in bad shape. Their heads were just barely above the water and hyperthermia was taking over. Alex's head kept dipping forward. He had trouble keeping it up out of the water.

The men on our ship soon launched another inflatable boat. A fisherman jumped in the spare Zodiac. His line was let go, which turned out to be a mistake. He should have gotten his outboard engine going before the crew let him go. Soon he too began to drift. He jumped towards the outboard engine and began jerking on the pull start. One pull. Two pulls. The engine sputtered. A third pull. A fourth pull. The engine stubbornly refused to start, and the crew member was drifting dramatically off into the darkness.

The searchlight was still trained on the two men in the water. Then, as if directed by the devil, a snow squall appeared out of nowhere. Like a car out on a highway on a dark night, the high beams of the searchlight picked up the flying snow but little else. Where the men were now was anyone's guess. A sense of nail-biting despair took over. Luckily, the snow squall passed quickly and the searchlight picked up the men again.

The light also picked up another Zodiac. It was paddled by four men. They came from a nearby fish supply vessel. It seemed that they too had trouble with their outboard engine. They saw the two men in the water and paddled feverishly towards them. They got to Pat just in time. He could barely keep his head up out of the water. It took two men to lift him into the raft. I remembered reading somewhere that a dead body seems to weigh a lot more than you'd expect. It looked like Pat's body was dead weight.

Next, they desperately rowed towards Alex. He too was almost done. Luckily for both of them their heads were back on to the waves—but from where I stood, they looked lifeless.



Once they had the two fisherman aboard, the small crew headed for the mothership. When they came alongside, Alex and Pat were dragged out and on to the deck. Their lifejackets were removed and with a man on either side, they were helped down the corridor.

Alex was first. His head drooped forward. He looked like the crucified Christ between two thieves. He couldn't stand up properly. When he was dragged past me his head lolled back. It looked like he had no eyes: nothing but whites. It was the same for Pat, who was incapable of standing on his own. They were carried to the hospital room where they were in the doctor's hands now—or maybe God's.

The siren sounded again. We all went out to the deck and looked up at the captain on the bridge. He pointed out to the ocean's surface where the searchlight had pinpointed the other lost Zodiac. The four men who saved Alex and Pat jumped into their Zodiac and paddled towards the lone sailor who never did get his engine started. A line was thrown to him and he was towed back to the ship.

The siren sang for a third time. It was the captain again pointing to the floating bag of fish. For a third time the four fishermen boarded their Zodiac. They headed for the bag of fish, attached a large towing cable and a winch brought it towards the stern.

I was surprised, but I shouldn't have been. That fish was worth a lot of money. It had to be processed: so it was business as usual. There was no alternative. The night shift went back to work, almost like nothing had happened.

Later, I went back out on to the deck. Surprisingly I was alone. The wind was still up. I zipped up my jacket. Then I heard a clunk. I looked around and saw nothing. It happened again. *Thackunk!* I looked around again, then looked up towards the top deck. There, still hanging from a thick davit cable, was the Zodiac from which both Alex and Pat had calamitously tumbled.

Almost simultaneously, as I saw the inflatable, the captain came to the end of the bridge. He too seemed to wonder where the noise was coming from. I stepped back into a shadow, hoping he couldn't see me.

But I could see him.

The wind tugged at his hair and clothes. He stared at the hanging Zodiac as if to take in fully what had happened. What went through his mind I don't know, but surely it must have occurred to him that he could have lost two crewmen; maybe more. Did he think he was responsible? Did he think that he almost had the unpleasant task of notifying a family, saying that their son, husband or brother had drowned? Would he make sure in the future that all safety equipment would work properly the next time there was an emergency?

He stared for another moment then snapped an order to the mate on the bridge. The hanging Zodiac soon was taken aboard and put back in the cradle.

The next day, Alex and Pat were back working on deck—business as usual. 🐟