

# Winter Harvest of Danger: Fishing On Board a Maine Trawler in the Storm-Tossed North Atlantic

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY EARL DOTTER



## DECEMBER 14

By early morning, the snow has blown deep drifts across the steel deck of the *Edward L. Moore (ELM)*, an 87-foot stern trawler tied snugly in her berth at the Fish Pier in Portland, Maine. It has been nearly six weeks since Scott "Scotty" Russell, 45, brought back the largest ground fish catch in his 19 years as captain. On that same trip, he discovered a serious leak around the rudder post of the vessel. Diminished structural integrity around the rudder post had likely been the cause of the sinking of the *Two Friends* in heavy weather earlier in the year, and the loss of two fishermen on board. The owners promptly arranged to have the *ELM* pulled out in Gloucester, Massachusetts; \$20,000 in repair and safety upgrades were needed before the boat was put back in service a month and a half later.

That same stormy afternoon, while Captain Russell and the crew were rewiring the electronics in the pilot house of the *ELM*, the captain of the 35-foot mussel dragger, *Little Raspy*, made a desperate call from Chandler Bay near Jonesport, Maine (about 80 miles northeast of Portland). He relayed the message that several large waves had just swamped his boat. The U.S. Coast Guard in Jonesport was alerted immediately; fighting 12- to 14-foot seas, the rescue craft was on the scene in twenty minutes. They found the dragger with the bow out of the icy water and the stern submerged. Life jackets and a life raft floated near the wreck. The captain and two crew members on board at the time of the accident were missing. Around 8:30 that evening, the body of one of the crew washed up against the rocky shore of Popplestone Beach in Jonesport.

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### DECEMBER 17

Heavy rain and gale-force winds delay the *ELM's* departure as the captain, first mate, and two deck hands gather to complete refitting and maintenance tasks. It is reported that a cruise ship has sunk off Cape Henry, Virginia, in 30-foot seas. Fortunately, no passengers were on board, and the entire crew of 35 was safely lifted off by the Coast Guard.

### DECEMBER 18

Under bright skies and in gusty winds, the *ELM* crew members say goodbye to their friends and loved ones. Captain Russell leads the crew through a safety walk-around. They review life raft deployment procedures and the location of survival suits, life rings, and fire extinguishers. Russell stresses orderly work areas, and has a zero-tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol on board.

At 3:15 p.m., the *ELM* eases away from the pier. By 3:45, while still in the shelter of the harbor, the first mate releases winches to deploy the heavy steel outriggers or “birds” on the port and starboard sides. The portside bird dips beneath the water’s surface and begins to provide stability to the boat as it heaves in the choppy inlet just past Cape Elizabeth Lighthouse.

The first mate notices that the cable in the starboard outrigger block is jammed, preventing the steel bird from being fully deployed. Without hesitation, he ties himself off and nimbly climbs to the end of the steel outrigger. The gusty “down east” wind buffets him as he uses hand tools to free the cable in the block. The rolling of the boat sends him high above the horizon and then dips him nearly to the waves below; he rides this sea-driven roller coaster until the crucial repair is finished.



At 4:00 p.m. the boat “turns the corner” into unprotected ocean waters. The *ELM*'s course is set for the fishing grounds called “Wrecked Bottom and The Hat,” 120 miles due east. “Wrecked Bottom” is so named because it is an historical fishing ground where the ocean floor is littered with wrecks.

### DECEMBER 19

At 4:30 a.m. there is a loud drone as the pair of main winches begin to unwind net cable. The men cast eerie shadows as they work to set the fishing gear. The gloomy orange glow of sodium vapor work lights etches the laboring fishermen against the black winter morning. The first mate releases the net to the bottom, a depth of 90–100 fathoms; the net's mouth is kept open and on the ocean floor by giant steel “doors,” each weighing a ton.



By 8:15 a.m. they haul the net back to test its effectiveness; only about 500–600 pounds of cod, haddock, flounder, and monkfish spill from the net. With the ocean almost still and the temperature in the 40's, one crew member remarks, “When it's flat-assed calm like this, you know you are going to pay for it later.” The fishing improves with each haul-back as adjustments are made to the net. After each return of the net to the sea, the catch must be gutted, sorted, and loaded into large laundry-type baskets. These are lowered in to the fish hold where the fish are stacked neatly into layers in large storage areas, and then iced. When the gutting and packing are complete, there is scarcely an hour and a half for rest and meals before the cycle repeats itself.

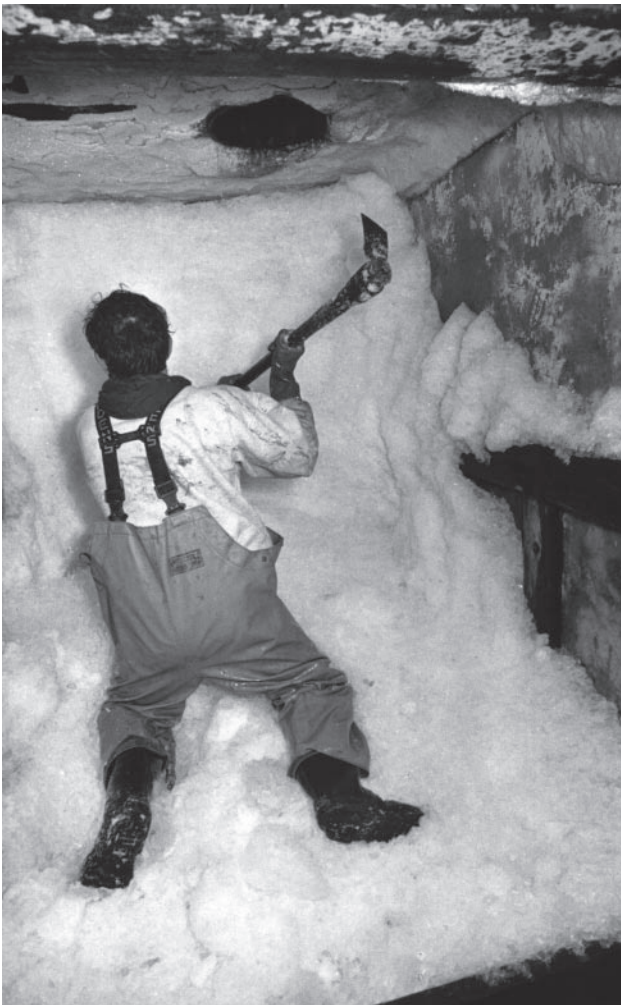
### DECEMBER 20

The steel-hulled *ELM* is 90 miles due east of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, as it plows through six- to eight-foot waves that arrived with first light. By 5:30 p.m., the boat is rocking and rolling heavily as sharp,

icy, wet gusts of wind buffet the sturdy hull. At 11:30 p.m., the net rips open on the bottom, tearing out a large section and releasing most of the catch. In the fierce, icy wind, the captain and crew patiently sew in a new section of net before setting it out again.

## DECEMBER 21

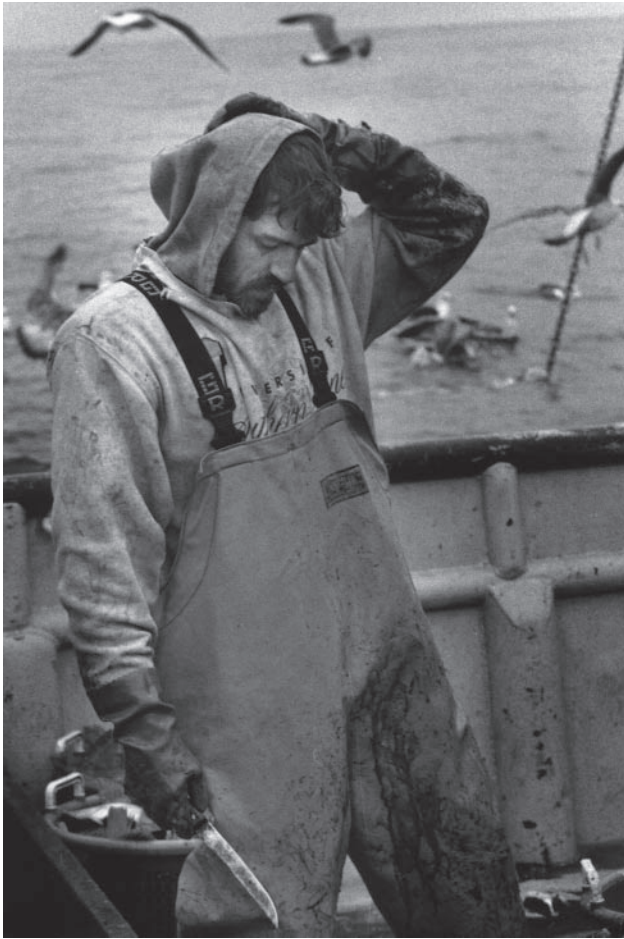
The 2:30 a.m. haul-back yields over 20 baskets of fish—the best catch yet. With a basket weighing 50–100 pounds, over 1500 pounds of fish are added to the iced catch below deck. Gutting knife in hand, a crew member brags about a recent catch when they brought 15,000 pounds on board in a single haul-back. Another observed, “With four tows per day, we need to catch at least 3–4,000 pounds per day to do good.”



## DECEMBER 22

Twenty-three baskets are hauled back on the twelfth return of the net during the early morning hours. Exhaustion is setting in from the unrelenting, round-the-clock schedule. The rotating watch adds to the stress, as each crew man is required to do night relief duty for the captain, in addition to his regular haul-back cycle.

The weather begins to deteriorate. Around 8:45 a.m., one of the crew notices the barometer falling sharply and comments, “If the barometer gets down to 29, you better not be around here.” His prediction that bad weather would follow the good comes to pass by 7:30 that evening, with a storm coming on strong. An average of 6,000 pounds of fish caught per day are now packed in the fish hold. Tomorrow they will vote whether to come home early for Christmas Eve or stay for the full ten-day trip. It’s clear that if the fishing remains good, they’ll all agree to stay.



The wind has gained strength since morning. The sea is green and churning. Each dip into the trough of a wave sends icy spray cascading over the bow and rails. By the evening haul-back, gale-force conditions prevail, testing the mettle of the crew in this hostile open ocean. At about 10 p.m., a roaring 15- to 20-foot wave rises out of the stormy, black night, slamming over the starboard side. A crew man's first reaction is to throw his sharp gutting knife into a corner. "No sense having that in your hand when you are tumbling around in the water." The first mate shouts in fear as the wave hits—"I'm going!" He takes the full force of the wave as it summersaults him four or five times to the stern. Remarkably, he manages to stay in the boat. Another surfs on the wave over the fish hold hatch to port, managing to grab hold of the spare trawl netting to save himself.

The wave has completely swamped the working deck area of the boat. The soaked, freezing, and shaken

fishermen immediately dive into the cold, swirling tide in an effort to reach the boat's scuppers—capped openings in the sides of the boat that must be opened quickly to release water, before another wave hits and causes the boat to founder. Eighty percent of the dressed catch that has not yet been stowed below sloshes out through the scuppers and back into the sea. The captain sets a course for a new fishing location, and the crew releases the net again an hour later.

### DECEMBER 23

Both the weather and the fishing are bad. With eight to ten-foot seas, the net does not hold to the ocean bottom well. The last haul-back yielded less than four baskets worth of fish, certainly not enough gain for the risk involved. Captain and crew vote to head for port, where they can spend the holiday at home with friends and family.



**DECEMBER 24**

With the pressure off, the crew enjoys a full night's sleep. In a flurry of activity, they wash down the decks, stow the gear, inspect the engine room, and inventory the catch. Darkness falls as the *ELM* slowly makes its way through the harbor. Once it is securely tied to its berth, the captain and crew pull themselves up onto the snow-covered pier and take off into the crisp night before Christmas.

**DECEMBER 25**

The *ELM* sits idle at its berth, with little market for fresh fish on Christmas Day.

**DECEMBER 26**

By 4:30 a.m., the “lumpers” are hard at work unloading the 21,363-pound catch from the fish hold of the *ELM*. Lumpers are crews that specialize in unloading the larger boats in the Portland commercial fishing fleet. The catch is culled (sorted by weight and species) and prepared for auction by 10 a.m.

The *ELM*'s catch brings in a total of \$46,500 at auction. After fuel, oil, and ice costs are deducted from that amount, the crew divides 40% of that figure; the company receives 60%. The crewmembers also receive a quarterly bonus equal to an additional 10% of their pay if they make at least a three-month commitment to work on the *ELM*.

After taking Christmas Day off, the crew returns to the pier by 8 p.m. and departs for their next fishing trip by 11:30 that night.

From her office overlooking the commercial fleet on the fish pier, Judith H. Harris, Fisheries Program Manager for the City of Portland, listed from memory the name of each Maine fisherman who died in the year 2000. Nine commercial fishermen were lost; five were fishing out of Portland. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, commercial fishermen face a fatality risk 28 times greater than all other occupations in the United States, making this industry the nation's most hazardous.

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Earl Dotter is the Josephine Albright Patterson Fellow with the Alicia Patterson Foundation, sponsor of his project documenting the hazards of commercial fishing in New England, and a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard School of Public Health. His photographs frequently appear in *Public Health Reports*. For additional information and photographs, visit Earl's website at <http://www.earldotter.com>.

