

James Thomas Hill

His name was James Thomas Hill Jr. and he was born in Brooklyn on November 15th, 1916. However, he liked to be called Tom. For this reason, his name is listed on the Veterans Memorial in Chappaqua, New York as Thomas Hill. His parents moved to Larchmont where he spent a good part of his childhood. He graduated from Mamaroneck High School in 1935. He played ice hockey on the school team and was very active in the Boy Scouts.

However, tragedy struck his family when his father was killed by a fall from a horse. By the time he was a young adult his mother, Regina, had married again and they moved with her new husband to Chappaqua, on Turner Drive off Seven Bridges Road. This arrangement meant he had a step sister, Bonnie Rankin, who attended Horace Greeley High School.

He spent some time in the Navy and must have found the service to his liking. When his time was up and with concerns about the war in Europe and the Pacific, he promptly enlisted in the Naval Reserve in October of 1940. By May of 1941 his unit was activated, and he was assigned to the newly commissioned U.S.S. Pollux. A military cargo ship, her mission was for transport and supply to military bases with the Atlantic Fleet.

On February 15th, 1942, the Pollux departed Maine for a large US air-naval base in Newfoundland. The convoy consisted of the Pollux laden with supplies, escorted by destroyers Truxtun, and Wilkes. The escort was required because the waters were patrolled by German U-boats. The ships performed the standard zig-zag pattern to avoid them. Radio silence was maintained as an additional precaution.

As they approached Newfoundland, the ships were engulfed in a rough winter storm. Visibility was at zero, and the ships were forced to use dead reckoning to navigate. The Pollux lost contact with its destroyer escorts and was pushed dangerously close to shore by giant waves and powerful ocean currents.

At 4:17 in the morning of February 18th, Ash Wednesday, the Pollux ran aground on the jagged rocks at Lawn Point, on Newfoundland's south coast. The Truxtun and Wilkes ran aground as well, but the Wilkes was able to break free. However, she was unable to get close enough to the others ships to provide any real help.

Many sailors were killed by the impact, others when the ships flooded, and still many more from the freezing temperatures of the water.

The Pollux was stranded on rocks next to an ice-covered cliff 75 feet high. Huge waves crashed up the sides of the cliff with spray reaching the top, then surged back over the deck of the ship. Many of the life rafts were crushed or swept away.

The ship pitched wildly, nothing was standing still. It was in danger of breaking in two and sinking. A desperate attempt to reach land began. Even though they were close to shore, the waves slammed all attempts back against the side of the ship. The men's wet clothing quickly froze and became stiff, making their efforts even more difficult.

Through bravery and strenuous effort, a life boat finally made it to shore and a life line was strung. But their ordeal was far from over.

The first men who crossed the violent seas that lay between them and shore had to scale 100-foot-tall ice-covered cliffs to reach safe ground. But they were exposed to the elements and found themselves amid a wilderness with rough terrain and no sign of inhabitation. Their survival was very much in doubt.

When the order to abandon ship came men threw themselves into the turbulent freezing water to make the 70 foot swim to the cliffs. For many, their struggles were in vain as they disappeared below the waves in the deadly undertow. Still others were smashed against the rocks and killed. Those that made it were trapped on a narrow icy ledge with a sheer cliff above them. Finally, lines were rigged to the ledge and the remaining personnel were moved. However, the rising tide and rough seas threatened to wash them all away.

In the tiny village of Lawn, two young boys told people they had seen a ship run aground at Lawn Point, but they were treated with skepticism.

When a lone survivor stumbled into the village of Saint Lawrence, the townsfolk rallied themselves and rushed to the scene with ropes and anything else they could find to help.

Men in the nearby community of Lawn, 10 miles away travelled to the wreck site through a winter storm and spent hours pulling sailors over the cliff and then transporting them to safety. A makeshift first-aid station was set up, and the women of the small fishing communities worked together to help wash off the oil that covered the sailors from head to toe and to get them warm.

Author Cassie Brown, who documented the Pollux and Truxton disaster, wrote in her book "Standing into Danger" about the moment Seaman James Thomas Hill was lost. It reads; "The shelf was icing up worse than ever, and they were compelled to kneel or lie flat, clutching with unfeeling hands to pieces of projecting rock. Not all had flashlights, but those who did switched them on and stuck them in their back pockets. Commander Turney kept swinging his light back and forth and encouraging his men."

"Then James Thomas Hill slipped and went over the ledge. "Jimm! Oh my God!" someone screamed."

"They heard him shouting for help and saw his flashlight blinking on the sea, then it disappeared. They trained their own lights on the sea, but the yellow surf rushing at them was all they saw. Even if they did see him, what could they possibly do for him ? They linked arms and prayed."

The Pollux and Truxton lost 203 shipmates that day, but 185 made it to safety thanks to the selfless efforts of the Newfoundlanders. The towns of Saint Lawrence and Lawn commemorated the men who lost their lives 76 years ago. A monument was erected on the site of the disaster and Streets in Saint Lawrence are named after the ships and some of the men.

Seaman 1st Class James Thomas Hill is listed as Missing in Action, Lost at Sea and his name can be found on the "Tablets of the Missing" at the East Coast Memorial in Battery Park, New York City.

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Sources

<https://www.mun.ca/mha/polluxtruxtun/pollux/>

Standing Into Danger, by Canadian author Cassie Brown