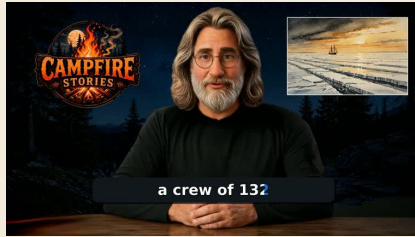




TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

The Sealing Disaster of 1914

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull in close tonight, friends, and hold the ones beside you, because this Newfoundland tale is a true one, and it is among the hardest I know. It happened in the spring of 1914, out on the great ice floes off the northeast coast, where the men of the Rock went every year to hunt the seal. And it is the story of how a hundred and thirty-two men were left out on that ice, in a blizzard, for two days and two nights, and how seventy-eight of them never came home.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Seventy-eight. Before you even begin I can feel the cold of it. Why were they out there at all, on the ice?



MARTY

Because the seal hunt, Carol, was how a poor outport family survived. Every spring the sealing ships pushed north into the ice, and the men went out over the floes on foot, miles from the ship, to take the seals. It was brutal, dangerous work, and it was often the only cash money a fisherman saw all year. In March of 1914, a crew of a hundred and thirty-two men off the ship the SS Newfoundland went out onto the ice under a young captain's son named Wes Kean. And what killed them, Carol, was not the cold alone. It was a mistake. A terrible, human mistake.

CAROL

A mistake. Oh, Marty, those are always the worst. What happened?



MARTY

There were two ships out there, Carol, close together on the ice. The Newfoundland, and another called the Stephano, captained by old Abram Kean, the young captain's own father. Wes Kean sent his hundred and thirty-two men across the ice toward his father's ship, believing they would be taken aboard the Stephano for the night, or sent back with clear orders, as the weather was turning. And his father, old Abram, believing the men were being looked after by the Newfoundland, gave them a bit of a meal, and then sent them back out onto

the ice to walk home to their own ship. Each captain, Carol, thought the other had the men. And so no one had them.

CAROL

No one had them. Marty, and a storm coming. Two fathers and sons and a hundred and thirty men caught between them.



MARTY

Caught in the gap, Carol. And as those men set out across the ice to walk the miles back to the Newfoundland, the storm broke. A full blizzard, driving snow, wind that could take the skin off you, and the temperature falling like a stone. And the men could not find their ship in the white. And their ship could not come for them, because it had no wireless, no way to know they were even out there in it. So a hundred and thirty-two men were stranded on the open ice, in a blizzard, with no shelter, no fire, no food, and no one coming.

CAROL

No one coming. Two days, you said. Marty, how does a man survive even one night of that?



MARTY

Many of them did not, Carol. They did what men do. They huddled together for warmth. They built little walls of ice against the wind. They kept each other moving, kept each other awake, because to sleep was to die. Fathers held their sons. Brothers held brothers. And through two endless nights, one by one, the cold took them. Some, driven mad by it, walked off into the storm and were never seen. Some simply sat down and did not get up. And the ones still living had to stand among the frozen bodies of their friends and their kin and keep themselves alive till morning, twice over.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Standing among their own dead to survive the night. I can hardly bear it. When did anyone find them?



MARTY

On the second day, Carol, the Newfoundland finally understood her men were not aboard the Stephano, and the alarm went up, and ships came searching through the ice. And what they found, Carol, is the image that Newfoundland has never forgotten. Men frozen where they stood, some still upright, locked in the ice. A father and his two sons frozen together in one last embrace. Fifty-four men were pulled off that ice alive, many of them ruined, hands and feet lost to frostbite. Seventy-eight were dead. And it happened, Carol, that same terrible week, another sealing ship, the Southern Cross, went down in the same storm with every one of her hundred and seventy-three hands. Newfoundland lost two hundred and fifty men to the ice in a matter of days.

CAROL

Two hundred and fifty. Marty, in one week. There cannot have been an outpost on the whole coast that did not lose someone.



MARTY

There was not, Carol. The grief went into every harbour on the northeast coast. Whole crews gone. Villages that lost their men, their boys, their futures, in one blow. And the hardest part, the part that made the whole country angry as well as heartbroken, was that it did not have to happen. There was no wireless on the Newfoundland to call for help, a cost the owners had spared. The two captains had each trusted the other. It was a disaster made of thrift and miscommunication and pride, out on the cruelest ice in the world.

CAROL

A disaster made of small human failures, and paid for by seventy-eight lives. Marty, is there anything but sorrow in this one? I need something to hold.



MARTY

There is this, Carol. Out of that horror, Newfoundland changed. The disaster forced the laws to change, forced wireless onto the ships, forced better care for the men who did that deadly work. The seventy-eight did not die for nothing, though God knows the price was too high. And more than that, Carol, the story became sacred. Newfoundland took those men into its heart and never let them go. A great writer, Cassie Brown, set it all down in a book so the country would remember every name. And they do remember. On the Rock, the sealing disaster is not history in a book. It is family. Everyone's great-grandfather knew a man who was out there.

CAROL

It is family. Yes, Marty. That is how a place holds its dead, isn't it, by refusing to let them become strangers.



MARTY

That is exactly how, Carol. So tonight we hold them too, the men of the SS Newfoundland, frozen on the ice for two nights because of a gap between two ships. We remember the fathers holding their sons. We remember that they were poor men doing killing work to feed their families, and that they deserved so much better than they got. And we remember that a hard land like Newfoundland raises hard, brave, loyal people, who will stand among their own dead in a blizzard and still try to keep each other alive till morning. That is the Rock. That is her people. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is out on that ice with those brave, doomed men and the ones who held them. Hold your people close against every cold there is, and come back to the fire.

