She guided her ship through
the worst Atlantic storms of the
century and earned a reputation
as one of the nation’s best
swordfishing captains. Now she’s
come home to catch up on life.

BY KEVIN COOL
The foghorn in the Isle au Haut home of Martha and James Greenlaw has a story.

Its provenance includes 13 fishermen stranded on the island, six miles off the Maine coast, when their boat ran aground offshore one night in 1903. After swimming through the frigid water, they dragged themselves onto the ledges of a pitch black shoreline, then tramped two miles through forest and across rocky outcroppings until they came to a small homestead near Robinson Point, a finger of granite that provides footing for a lighthouse. Soaked and shivering, they knocked on the door.

The woman who answered their knock, Lillian Robinson, was Linda Greenlaw ’83’s great-grandmother. For the next 10 days she fed and nursed back to health the 13 fishermen, some of whom were suffering from pneumonia. With no money to repay the family that had saved their lives, the men retraced their steps along the shoreline, retrieved the box model foghorn that had washed ashore with them and presented it to the Robinsons as a gesture of thanks.

Succeeding generations of family members have prized the foghorn as a symbol of their sea heritage. It has survived nearly a century of children’s play, salt air and cold storage. It still works.

Perhaps the foghorn’s durability is a sign that Providence has seen fit to reward the Robinsons’ deeds by granting their descendants protection from the sea. Linda Greenlaw, for one, has needed it.
Isle au Haut is a 45-minute boat ride from the nearest mainland town. Its only village, a haphazard collection of modest houses and a couple of small retail stores, is situated on the tip of a harbor where, between April and October, lobster boats bob in the gentle swell and offer picturesque foregrounds for tourists' photographs. But tourists coming here don't find espresso bars or cute cafes with patio dining. This is a working island, as unpretentious as it is beautiful.

Greenlaw's family has been on Isle au Haut since before the Revolutionary War, taking their living for more than 20 generations from the fertile waters that surround it. Linda is the first member of the family whose fishing has made her famous.

She had achieved a certain celebrity in fishing circles even before Sebastian Junger's best-selling book, The Perfect Storm, in which he depicts the terrifying ordeal of fishing boat crews caught in the largest Atlantic storm of the 20th century—the Halloween Gale of 1991. As the captain of a swordfishing boat that survived, Greenlaw is prominently mentioned. She was one of the last people to talk with Billy Tyne, the captain of the doomed Andrea Gail.

Since The Perfect Storm Greenlaw has been featured in two television documentaries and courted by publishers and Hollywood producers interested in telling her story. Overwhelmed by the offers, she hired an agent last fall.

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"It's been fun," she said. "I guess this is my fifteen minutes of fame."

Junger's book and the subsequent media exposure it generated haven't changed Greenlaw's relationship with the folks on Isle au Haut, who aren't the fawning sort, although Linda's mother, Martha Greenlaw, confides that, privately, Linda is revered. The 70 souls who ride out the island's inhospitable winters are warmed by Greenlaw's cheerful, infectious spirit that seems to occupy more space than her petite body accounts for. Neighbors beam with delight when she stops to chat, which she virtually always does upon meeting another islander.

One of the island's daily rhythms involves the arrival of the mailboat from Stonington, which on one day last September deposited, in addition to boxes of groceries, a handful of daytrippers. An English tourist from Leeds, island maps carried conspicuously in hand, were followed off by a middle-aged Ohio couple and two elderly women. Greenlaw, leaning on the rail of the pier watching the tourists disembark, hollered playfully to the boat captain, who was unloading cargo. "Anything for me?"

The man looked up and smiled as he placed a crate of Budweiser on the dock. "This yours?" he said, noddling toward the beer.

Greenlaw smiled, eased herself off the rail, waved and walked back up the pier to her well-worn Ford pickup. "I love this place," she said. "I want everybody who comes here to love it, too."

At the general store where she stops to get a soda, a man leaning against a truck calls out, facetiously, "Hey, can I get your autograph?" Greenlaw smiles and acknowledges him with a wave. He has just seen the article about Greenlaw, written by Junger, in the October issue of Vanity Fair. She is pictured in her lobster boat, wearing a slicker and work gloves, framed by bruise-colored clouds. "They tried to make it all stormy looking even though it was a nice day," she said of the photography crew. "They were disappointed the weather was so good."

Actually, autograph requests have become routine. When she showed up for a book signing by Junger in South Portland, the author introduced her to the crowd surrounding his table. Suddenly she became the object of the autograph seekers. She says she signs on "her spot" on the map in the preface of The Perfect Storm—45 degrees latitude and 45 degrees longitude: the fertile fishing grounds southeast of Newfoundland known as the Grand Banks, 1,500 miles from the U.S. mainland. That was the approximate position of her boat, the 100-foot Hannah Boden, when the storm of the century hit seven years ago. She and her crew were just far enough east to miss the apex of the storm's fury, says Greenlaw. "We were lucky."

He grew up learning about boats from her father, James, and practiced her nautical skills during summers at the family's home on Isle au Haut. Occasionally her dad would allow her to operate the family's 38-foot boat. And sometimes, according to Martha, Linda sneaked a joy ride. "One summer when she was thirteen or fourteen she took the boat, without us knowing, and went up and down the island thoroughfare with her little brother and sister on board. She didn't go past the lighthouse because she knew we would see her. We didn't find out until years later," Martha said.

An exceptional student and an accomplished athlete at Topsham High School, Greenlaw continued the long line of family members attending Colby, following her father, James '57; uncles, Charles Greenlaw '50 and George Greenlaw '55; her grandfather Aubrey Greenlaw '20 and a great aunt, Alma Guilden '30. She expected to go to law school after Colby, "Nobody, myself included, thought for one second that I would make my living fishing," she said.

During the summer between Greenlaw's freshman and sophomore years at Colby, a high school friend invited Linda to work on her father's swordfishing boat, the Walter Leeman. The friend got
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seasick and had to be airlifted home; Greenlaw stayed and found her calling. She went back the next summer and the summer after that, using the money she made to help pay her way through Colby. By the time she graduated, she was, so to speak, hooked.

“I thought, ‘Well, I’ll fish for a year and then go on to graduate school,’” she said. “When the year was over, I never gave graduate school another thought. I realized that I loved fishing and that I was good at it.”

Martha Greenlaw admits she was disappointed with her daughter’s decision to forego the law for a life at sea. She was even a little embarrassed, she says, when friends asked what Linda was doing and she had to reply, “fishing.” “I mean, here’s this talented girl who could do anything she wants and she’s fishing!” Martha said. “People would look at me funny. But we accepted it. It’s what she wanted to do.”

When Alden Leeman, the owner of the Walter Leeman, bought a second boat, the Gloria Dauen, he made Greenlaw captain. Still in her 20s, Greenlaw began establishing her reputation as an expert fisherman. The industry is quite small and “everybody knows everybody,” Greenlaw said, so word gets around.

Bob Brown, regarded by many as the premier swordfishing captain in the U.S. fleet in his prime, hired Greenlaw to operate his boat the Hannah Boden in 1989. The boat had state-of-the-art equipment and attracted top crewmen. Greenlaw says, They caught a lot of fish.

Junger, describing Greenlaw in The Perfect Storm, wrote, “Not only is Greenlaw one of the only women in the business, she’s one of the best captains, period, on the entire East Coast. Year after year, trip after trip, she makes more money than almost anyone else. When the Hannah Boden unloads her catch in Gloucester, swordfish prices plummet halfway across the world.”

Greenlaw attributes that success to the superior equipment and crew on the Hannah Boden. “I had the best of everything,” she said, “Guys really wanted to work on our boat so we always got the best crews.”

She saw little of her beloved Isle au Haut during the 16 years she worked as a commercial fisherman. A typical fishing trip lasted a month, after which the boat would dock for two to three days, re provision, repair equipment and head out to sea again.

Five days of steady steaming were required to reach the Grand
Banks. Upon arriving there, the crew would set out a 40-mile line with 1,000 hooks, Greenlaw says, and from that point until a decision was made to head home, “you were fishing all the time.”

For 10 to 20 days, the routine consisted of “work, work, work, work, work, eat, sleep,” Greenlaw said. The crew typically slept three hours or less. They stayed in their bunks until called to the deck, passing up breakfast for a few extra minutes of rest. “Sleep time was so precious they wanted to use every minute of it,” Greenlaw said. “They would throw on their boots and oil gear and be on deck, half awake but ready to work in five minutes. By seven a.m. everybody was starving so somebody would run in and throw a frozen pizza in the oven and that would be breakfast. One summer for four months I ate frozen pizza for breakfast every day.”

The Grand Banks breeds bad weather, especially in the fall, and the Hannah Boden often was fishing under difficult conditions, Greenlaw says. “We always had our gear in the water unless it was blowing fifty or sixty [knots],” she said. “Guys from Florida would throw sand on the deck. Two years later her boat was going home, because it isn’t going to get much better.”

Greenlaw says her gender was never an issue with other fishermen, although it did provide grist for good-natured teasing occasionally. “I remember one trip when we were doing very well. We caught about a hundred fish in one day, which is like a quarter of the entire trip. That night on the radio when everybody was comparing notes, I said that we had caught a hundred fish. Most of the other boats had caught 20 or 25. One of the captains came on and said, ‘Go home and bake a cake.’”

Male boat captains often are surprised when they meet the 5’3” Greenlaw that she is so small. She recalls that a fellow Grand Banks fisherman to whom she had talked on the radio many times called her “a little girl with a big boat” when they finally met in person. “He was expecting me to be this two-hundred-pound Amazon, I guess,” she said. “I don’t know why because there is no stereotypical sized man who fishes, they come in all shapes and sizes. But I get that a lot; people often say, ‘I thought you’d be bigger.’”

The 1991 gale featured 100-foot waves that ripped equipment weighing thousands of pounds cleanly off the deck. Two years later her boat was a trace. Greenlaw’s crew had one last, eerie reminder of their friends when, after the storm subsided, they sailed past oil drums with the letters AG on the side. To this day, nobody knows when or where the Andrea Gail sank.

The worst part of the experience, she says, was returning to Gloucester, Mass., and facing the family members of the men from the Andrea Gail. “People would ask, ‘What did he say when you last talked to him?’ or ‘Do you think they’re in a life raft?’ It was awful,” she said.

Two years later, her boat was caught in a storm nearly as fierce, but this time they weren’t spared the worst of it. Greenlaw recalls waves six stories high, so massive that they obliterated the Hannah Boden from radar screens.

Greenlaw downplays the seriousness of her severe weather experiences. James Greenlaw says this may be an extension of the mental toughness she has developed to deal with the dangers of her job. “She’s a professional, and dealing with the weather is part of what she does,” he said. “I imagine if you or I had been on that boat in that storm we would talk about it much differently.”

She is the antithesis of a self-promoter, modest about her achievements and consistent that her gender not be used as the fulcrum for telling her story. “I’m not a feminist in any way, shape or form,” she said. “I didn’t have to overcome a lot of barriers because I was a woman.” Like it or not, though, her excellence in

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Two years ago, after spending more than 15 summers at sea, Greenlaw decided to buy her own lobster boat and go into business for herself. She owns 300 traps in the waters near Isle au Haut, which she fishes in a 35-foot boat, the Mattie Belle. She says the boat "felt like a tinker toy" compared to the Hannah Boden.

In mid-summer she rises as early as 3:30 a.m. to get bait from the local co-op and is pulling in traps with the first streaks of light. She says it's easy work compared to offshore fishing. "Actually, lobstering is more like farming than fishing," she said. "You've got your own little piece of land and your own little crop. It's not like swordfishing where you're putting a hook in the water and trying to catch something on it."

She farms her plot from spring until late October or early November, pulls out her boat and heads south to captain a commercial boat out of Portland or Gloucester or ports farther south. For three years she ran a boat in the Caribbean and admits that winters there and summers in Isle au Haut are about as good as it gets. This winter, though, she is not fishing at all. She is writing her life story.

Simon and Schuster touched off a bidding war last fall when they approached her about publishing an autobiography. She eventually signed with Hyperion Books and hopes to have a manuscript finished this spring.

Neither her decision to write nor her withdrawal to the more composed, traditional life of lobstering necessarily signal the end of Greenlaw's offshore adventures. "I wouldn't want to say that Linda's fishing days are over," Martha said. "I wouldn't be surprised if she went back someday."

But Greenlaw says the business has lost some of its allure since recent load limit regulations were implemented. It's more difficult for swordfish boat owners to make money, and for captains to distinguish themselves, she says, "If everybody has the same amount of fish in their boat, how do you tell the good fishermen from the bad ones? Anybody can catch thirty thousand pounds on a trip," she said.

Besides, she likes being home, she says. It allows her to fully enjoy her family and the beauty of Isle au Haut. And she is involved in island politics now, attempting to reclaim the lighthouse from the government, which decommissioned it several years ago.

She can sit on the deck of her family home, looking west past Robinson Point where the lighthouse casts its shadow near where her boat is moored, and imagine the men and women whose connection to the sea preceded hers. The salt that was in their blood is in hers, too, and in the foghorn resting next to her wicker chair.