



Though well broken up there is still lots of the Victoria to find and inspect



A pile of 12 cannonballs collected together by a previous group of divers

sheer remoteness, is what makes it an important site in terms of Canadian maritime history, and of great interest to divers.

Why the island is named after St Paul is not really clear. According to a map of 1539, the island was called Gtjmegeit, though later the Miikmaq Indians used the name *Giogtao Menigog*. As for St Paul, well, while he was shipwrecked in 60 AD, that was on the island of Malta at a place known to this day as St Paul's Bay – he never did get to visit Canada.

Whatever name was used, St Paul Island has remained a serious menace to shipping for over 300 years. Nobody knows precisely how many ships have been lost, but they number hundreds. Nobody knows how many lives have been lost, but they number hundreds. A significant part of the tragedy has always been that unforgiving coastline, where there is neither a natural harbour nor sheltered bay for a vessel in distress, nor is there a sloping beach for one who is swimming for his life...

With so many shipwrecks over so many years, one might have expected to see evidence of rats and other rodents having colonised the island – after all, they do have a way of getting ashore. Strangely, however, the island is so bleak that there is no wildlife whatsoever, other than passing birds among the wild grass and windswept trees. There are some wild berries in the summer months, but even these were never plentiful enough to sustain life. Thus, many a stranded mariner who was fortunate enough to get safely ashore could only endure an agonising and painful death from starvation and exposure.

During a terrible storm in January 1825, the *Jessie* – out of Prince Edward Island – was wrecked and 27 people made it safely to shore. From scribbled notes eventually found among their bodies, it seems that they managed to survive for up to ten weeks before succumbing to the prevailing conditions. Similarly, in 1835, four ships were wrecked in a single night of atrocious storms and the surviving passengers and crews from those vessels also met with the same fate. On this occasion, however, the outcry was such that, in 1837, the British Government finally erected two light stations at the northern and southern ends of the island.

While it would have provided little comfort to those who were stranded, today a number of very appropriate epitaphs lie around the island with rocks, points and coves now named after lost ships.

In later years the island supported a work force of 50 people employed in a lobster cannery, and those buildings were later used by the Royal Canadian Air Force as a monitoring station. Although now deserted, the buildings are still standing and are a regular stopping point for visiting divers. As for the lighthouses, these are now unmanned and automated.

TO MENTION BUT ONE

There are not many books, stories or articles written about St Paul Island, so it is easy to accept exaggeration of the actual number of lost ships. In recent years, however, Canada has come to understand, study and preserve its maritime history and professional researchers

have indicated that as many as 350 shipwrecks can be identified in the waters immediately around the island. They also acknowledge that many more remain unidentified. Then, of course, there are those in deeper waters...

On 14 June 1863, the *Norwegian*, a 2,000-tonne sail and steam vessel, was outbound from Montreal to England with a general cargo and complement of 326 passengers and a crew of 88. The *Norwegian* was a fine, relatively new vessel and a large ship for her day. Captain Andrew McMaster travelled this route frequently and was on the bridge to take regular bearings, so as to be certain of their position. Suddenly, his worst fears were realised when, without warning, the fog descended and visibility was reduced to zero.

Knowing that the flood tide would quickly carry his ship far from her allotted course, he ordered full speed and utilised both his engines and every inch of sail at his disposal. His plan was simply to get out into the Atlantic as safely and quickly as possible. He was convinced he knew precisely where he was and he fully intended to beat the fog. It is not known where he went wrong, but his calculations were in error and, at her top speed of 13 knots, the *Norwegian* ran hard onto the east coast of St Paul Island at a place now known as Norwegian Head. Amazingly, everyone survived, though some had to wait six weeks until they were rescued, during which time a baby was born to one of the survivors.



A large dahlia anemone

SPLASH WATERSPORTS

I was visiting Halifax as a guest of the Nova Scotia Board of Tourism, which placed me with Terry Dwyer's own multi-faceted facility called Splash Watersports – a PADI five star centre. Terry has wide-ranging experience and is currently involved with everything from recreational and professional diving to underwater lighting for film companies. He also runs Movie Marine Canada, a division of Splash Watersports which supplies diving support services for major motion pictures. He was heavily involved with the recent film *Titanic*, a great deal of which was shot on location in Nova Scotia, supplying personnel, safety divers and underwater support equipment.

Terry and his staff are regularly found running a variety of courses, weekend expeditions or simply enjoying the incredibly exciting diving that is found right on their doorstep. Whether you are amateur or professional, this is the man to provide what you are seeking in this neck of the woods. When I first told him I wanted to see some local shipwrecks, his response was: "Where do you want to start? We have 350 in and around Halifax and throughout Nova Scotia there are over 5,000!"

In the meantime, however, as our journey towards St Paul progressed, the features of the island began to take shape and we were soon passing close to the southern shores and taking photographs of the lighthouse there. As we progressed northwards up the east coast, Terry pointed out those names associated with lost ships – McLeod's Cove, Isabella Cove, Glenroe Cove and so on, until we could see the old RCAF building and the adjacent cottage. We