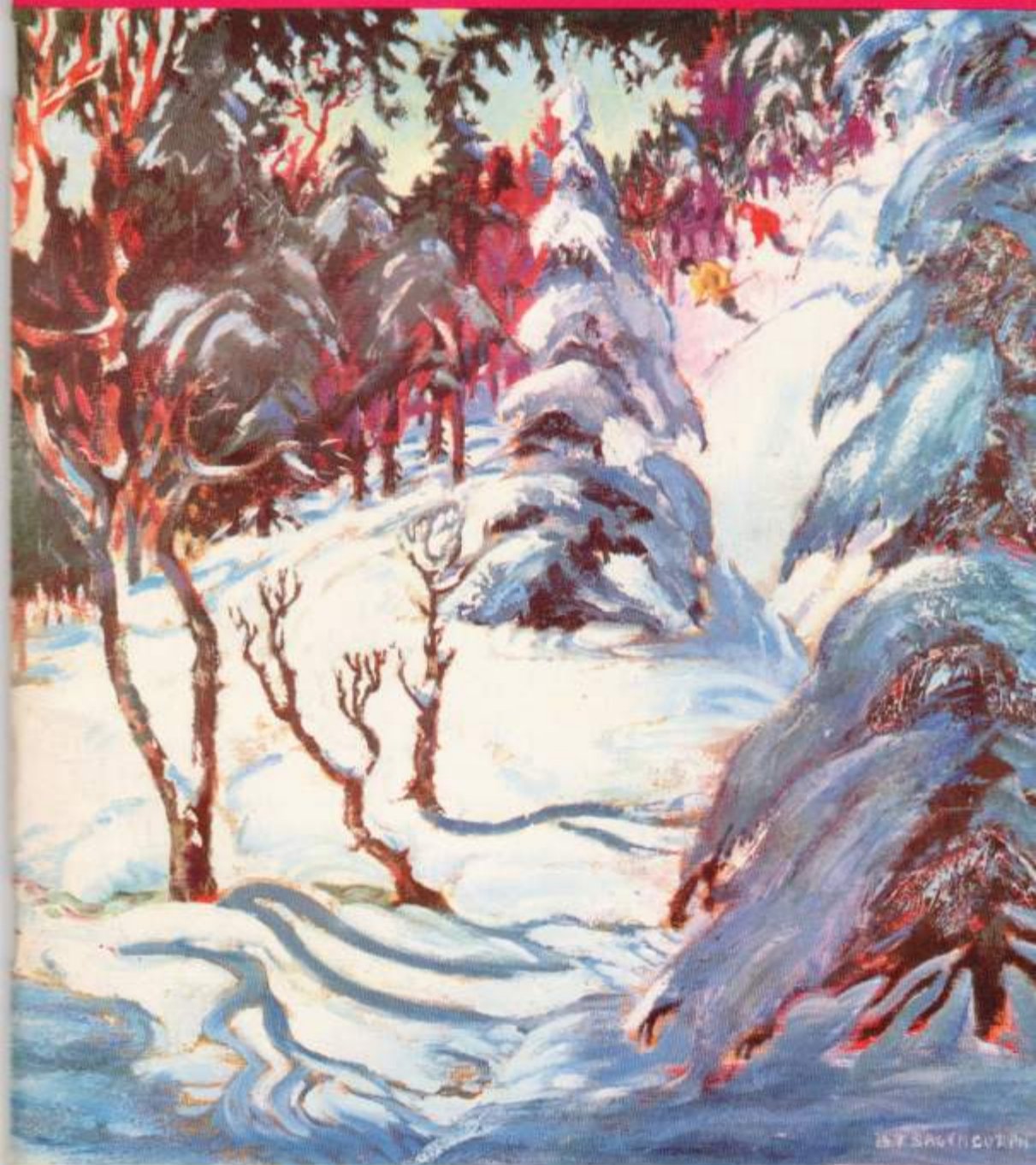


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35 CENTS



THE GREAT SEA-WATER SWINDLE

— BY JOHN MASON



The Bell That Tolls for 12

by BOB CAHILL

SOMETIMES THE MERE ROLLING OF THE SHIP would cause the bell to clang out its warning, but many times, if the sea was calm, one of the twelve men would have to ring it manually. He would stand there for hours, ringing the bell until he could stand the deafening sound no longer; then another man would take his place. The 112-foot vessel that housed the bell was stationed permanently southwest of Cuttyhunk Island, near the entrance to Buzzards Bay. She was the *Vineyard Sound Lightship*, and she was held to the sea floor by huge mushroom anchors. Her mission was to warn other ships of the treacherous reefs located near the Sound and Bay entrances. When thick fog clouded the sea so that other mariners could not see the floating beacon, she would ring her great bell which was firmly attached to the forward deck. Skippers could locate the Lightship by the ominous sound and thereby gain safe passage around the reefs. Twelve Coast Guardsmen remained on duty aboard the *Vineyard*, keeping her lights ablaze and her bell ringing, no matter how rough the weather.

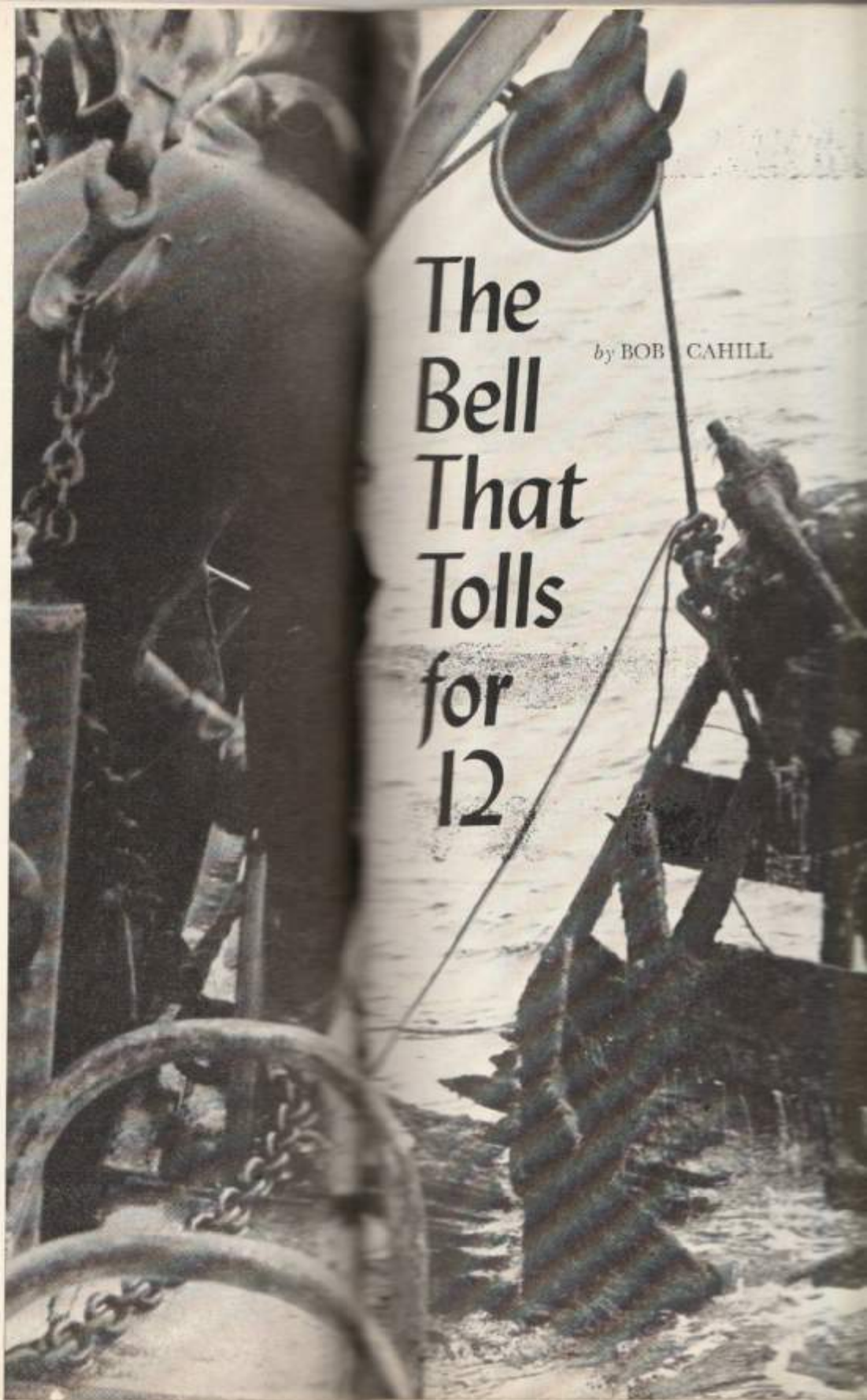
On September 14, 1944, the wind was wild, and the sea began to lift the Lightship in great swells. Salt spray whistled across her deck, and the bell began to toll. It tolled the final hours of the *Vineyard* and her crew. The squall soon turned into a full-scale hurricane that lashed the Cape Cod coast for six hours. There was little damage ashore, for the storm struck at ebb tide. Then came a report that the *Vineyard Sound Lightship* was missing. Other lightships had frequently broken free of their moorings during rough weather and had found shelter, either out to sea or in some local port.

(Continued on page 52)

A dramatic culmination to years of search for the sunken "Vineyard"—her huge bell breaks the surface and, rusty and covered with grime, echoes an eerie ring as it's hauled aboard the "Sylvia Mae."

The Bell That Tolls for 12

by BOB CAHILL





The Bell That Tolls for 12

(Continued)

It was generally thought that this was what happened to the *Vineyard*. But after the weather cleared, there was still no report from the Lightship. She could not be found anywhere. It was then concluded that the great floating sentinel had perished in the sea. Until September 1963, nineteen years later, no one knew where the *Vineyard* sank, nor the cause of her sinking.

Brad Luther Jr., a fireman and professional diver from Fairhaven, Massachusetts, had searched diligently for the *Vineyard* for almost six years, without any luck. From spring through the summer of 1963, he and a team of divers, called the Fairhaven Whalers, utilized many new underwater search techniques in an attempt to find the sunken relic. In July 1963, Dr. Harold Edgerton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, contacted Brad Luther. The Doctor's company, EG&G (Edgerton, Germeshausen and Grier) of Boston, had developed a new sonar device that could chart the ocean bottom from a side angle, giving the surface operator a profile sketch of any unusual objects or obtrusions in the depths. Dr. Edgerton wanted to test the capabilities and limitations of this new sonar

device, and Brad Luther was anxious to use it in his search for the Lightship.

On August 12, and again on August 25, the new sonar system was used to probe Buzzards Bay; but results were negative. On September 2, the sonar did record a large object in seventy feet of water, nine miles off the coast of Westport. Because of foul weather, it wasn't until September 9 that Brad Luther was able to inspect the obstruction on the sea floor which Doctor Edgerton's device had charted. Almost nineteen years to the day of the disaster, Brad Luther donned his scuba diving equipment and splashed into the Atlantic. Below, the diver saw a mass of twisted and rusty metal imbedded in the sand and weeds. In the midst of this rubble was a giant bell—Brad Luther had found the wreck of the *Vineyard*.

"Knowing how much labor and time had gone into the search," says Mr. Luther, "it's difficult to describe the feeling I had viewing this wreck for the first time. I descended down a drag line from the surface and approached the wreckage from the stern. Swimming over the hull plates, I found that the upper wooden deck had washed away, exposing the lower deck. The wheelhouse structure and the aft cabin, including the radio shack, had somersaulted over the port rail and were



Left: The former Nauset Lifesaving Station, now the headquarters of the Cape Cod National Seashore—and future site of the Nauset Lifesaving Museum. Here the “Vineyard” bell will be mounted as a memorial. Below: Brad Luther, Jr. (left), who found the wreck, and Courtney Gifford prepare to go 70 feet down to the “Vineyard” remains.

lying in the sand. The bow and after decks were intact. The mushroom anchor, usually utilized during a storm, was setting upright in the sand, close to a deep gash in the ship's bow.”

This advanced the theory that the mushroom anchor, which usually hangs over the rail of the ship, might have broken loose during the hurricane and, swinging to and fro, crashed into the bow plates, allowing water to seep into the Lightship and causing her to sink. The hole in the bow was located in the chain locker, a place where the Coast Guardsmen couldn't reach to stop the intake of water.

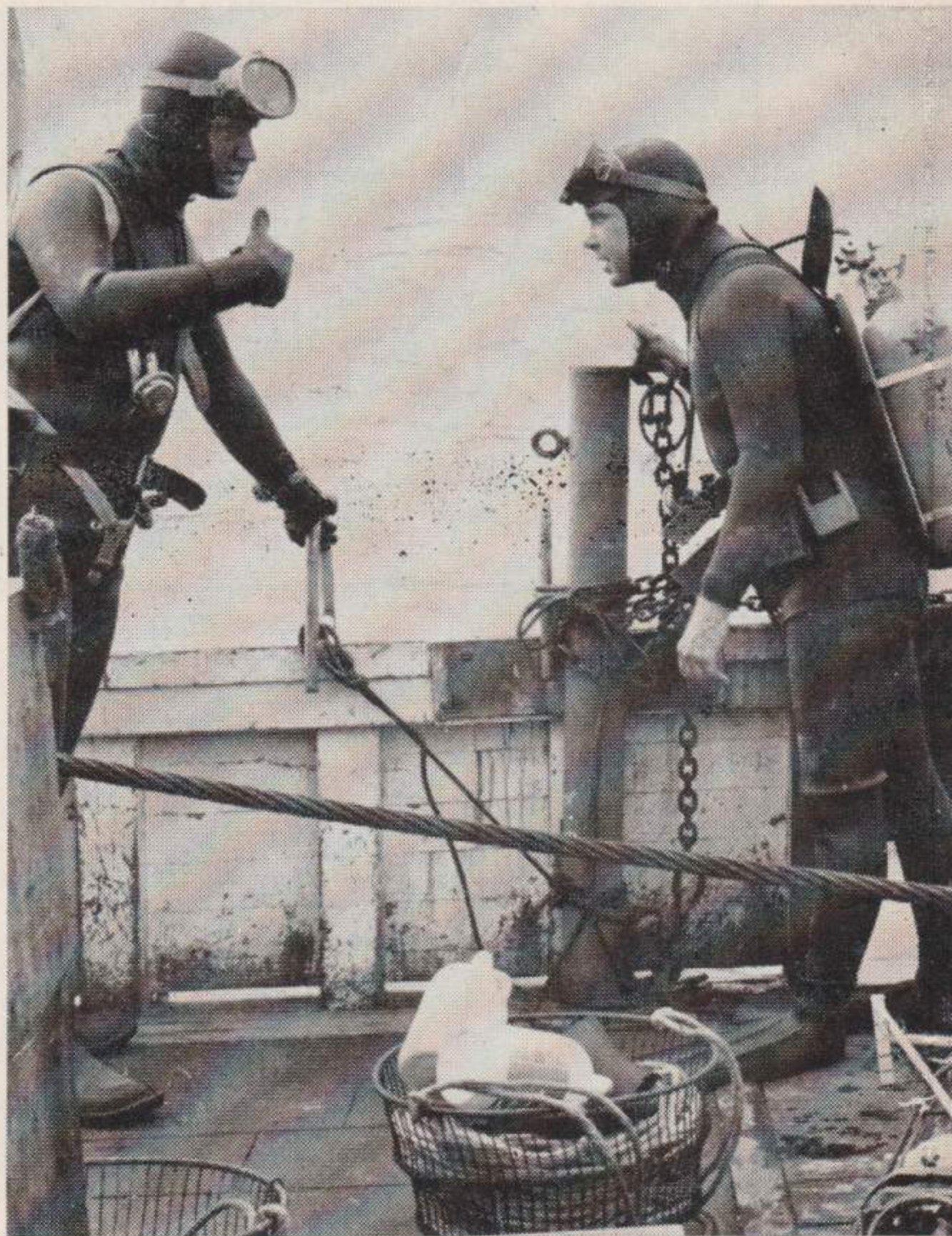
The Coast Guard was contacted and permission was granted to return to the wreck site to salvage items of historical value. The National Park Service expressed interest in the bell and the beacon light, and Brad Luther wanted to salvage something for Doctor Edgerton and the M.I.T. Maritime Museum. On September 22, seven members of the Fairhaven Whalers Diving Club, plus Tom Gilbert, Chief Naturalist of Cape Cod National Seashore, and Dave Owens, photographer for Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, boarded the ninety-five-foot vessel *Sylvia Mae* and sailed out of New Bedford to commence salvage operations.

Once the surface ship was secured to the wreck, divers Paul Miller and Brad



Luther descended and made their way to the forward section of the wreckage where the bell was located. Jim Romero and Brad Livesey then plunged into the choppy waters with a heavy cable which they attached to the bell structure, for lifting it to the surface. Courtney Gifford and Ed Weeks scoured the wreckage for other artifacts, and in their probe managed to locate and secure the ship's binnacle and compass, which would be donated to the M.I.T. Museum.

While the divers were below, a storm whipped out of the northeast and white caps foamed over the surface waters. The *Sylvia* (Continued on page 81)



The Bell That Tolls for 12

(Continued from page 53)

Mae began to rock, and one of the lines holding the ship to the wreckage parted, leaving only the cable attached to the bell, and a light bow line to secure the vessel against the wild wind and waves. In the depths, the divers were unaware of the severe surface conditions.

Valuable items were being collected below: a Springfield rifle, a sextant, dishes, cups, a second compass, all were placed in a wire basket to be hauled to the surface. Brad Luther found the ship's brass clock, still intact except that the hands were missing. If they had been present, they probably would have recorded the time of the ship's sinking. Brad headed for the surface with the clock in his hand. Half way up, the clock exploded. Apparently, water had seeped into the mechanism, compressing the air inside it. The air expanded as Brad carried the clock into a lighter atmosphere, which in turn caused the explosion. Although Brad Luther wasn't injured, he was startled, but he was even more so when he reached the surface to find the *Sylvia Mae* bobbing uncontrollably in rough seas. Brad signaled the other divers to surface. Heavy swells rolled into the ship as the divers attempted to board her. One minute the ladder was ~~swash~~, the next she was high and dry, ~~towing~~ over the divers' heads. One by one, they grabbed the pitching ladder as it dropped into the sea and quickly scurried up the metal rungs before they were battered by a wave.

With all the divers a bit bruised but safely aboard, the skipper of the *Sylvia Mae* gave the order to lift the bell. Mate Leo Grimes, now drenched to the skin from water kicking over the bow, started the



Up comes the "Vineyard's" beacon light.

winches whirling. Each time he jammed the clutch into gear, the ship heeled over and the cable went taut. Then Grimes pulled another lever and the cable began to wind freely on the drum. The bell had broken free from the wreckage, but now the bow line, the only connecting line to the wreck, parted and the ship began to drift. Skipper Sheldon Kent quickly started the *Sylvia Mae's* engine—then the sight they had been waiting for, the giant bell, broke the surface. It was rusty and covered with green sea moss. It echoed an eerie ring as it was hauled aboard and secured to the deck of the ship. The exhausted crew of the *Sylvia Mae* headed the ship into the calmer waters of New Bedford harbor.

The bell was delivered to the site of the future Nauset Lifesaving Museum of the Cape Cod National Seashore. Here it will be cleaned and mounted as a permanent memorial to the twelve Coast Guardsmen who had pledged themselves to the safety of other mariners. It is for these twelve men that the bell now tolls. ■ ■

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