

Forty-eight Canadian high-school students took to the sea and were on the adventure of their lives—until they had to...

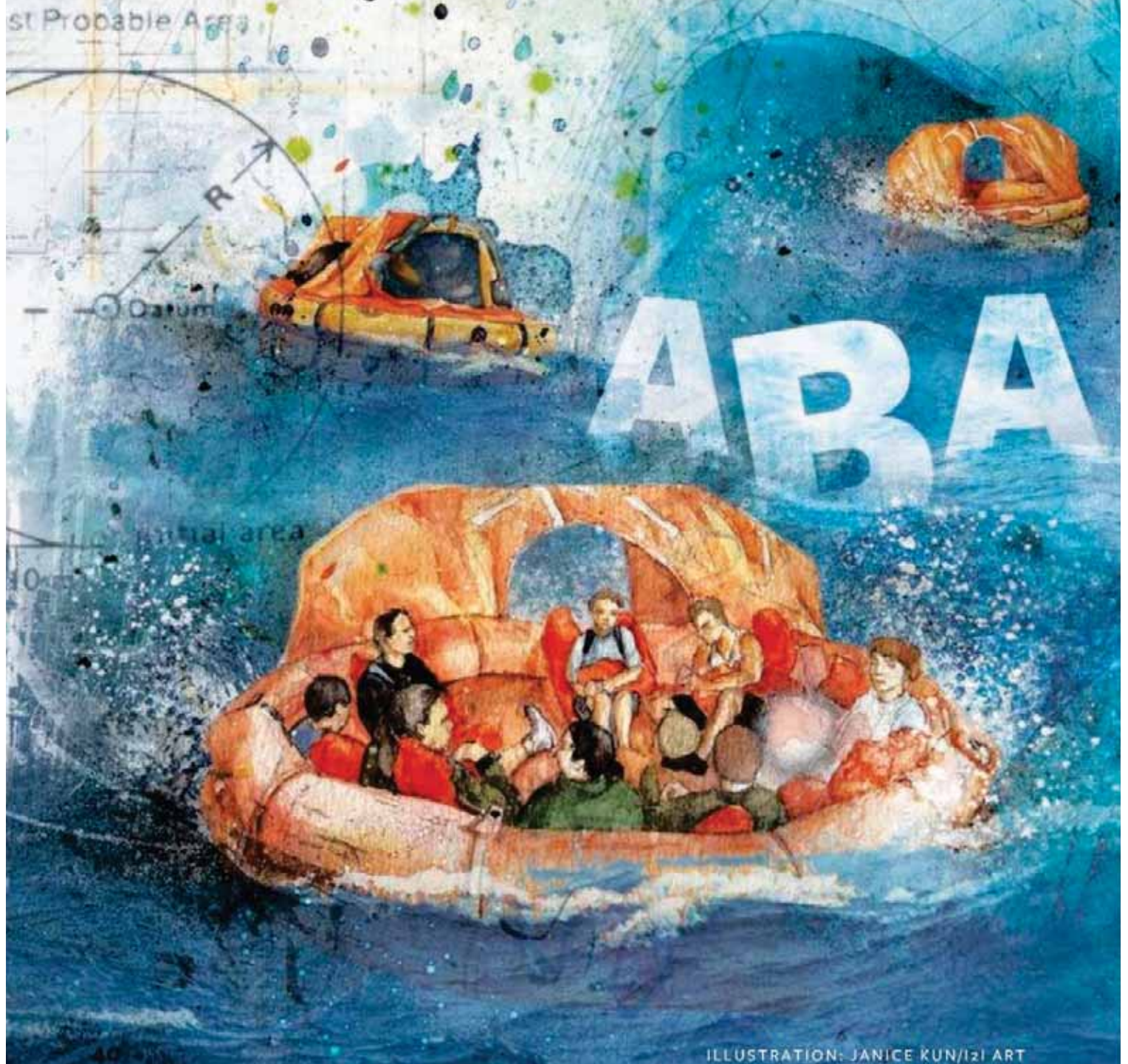
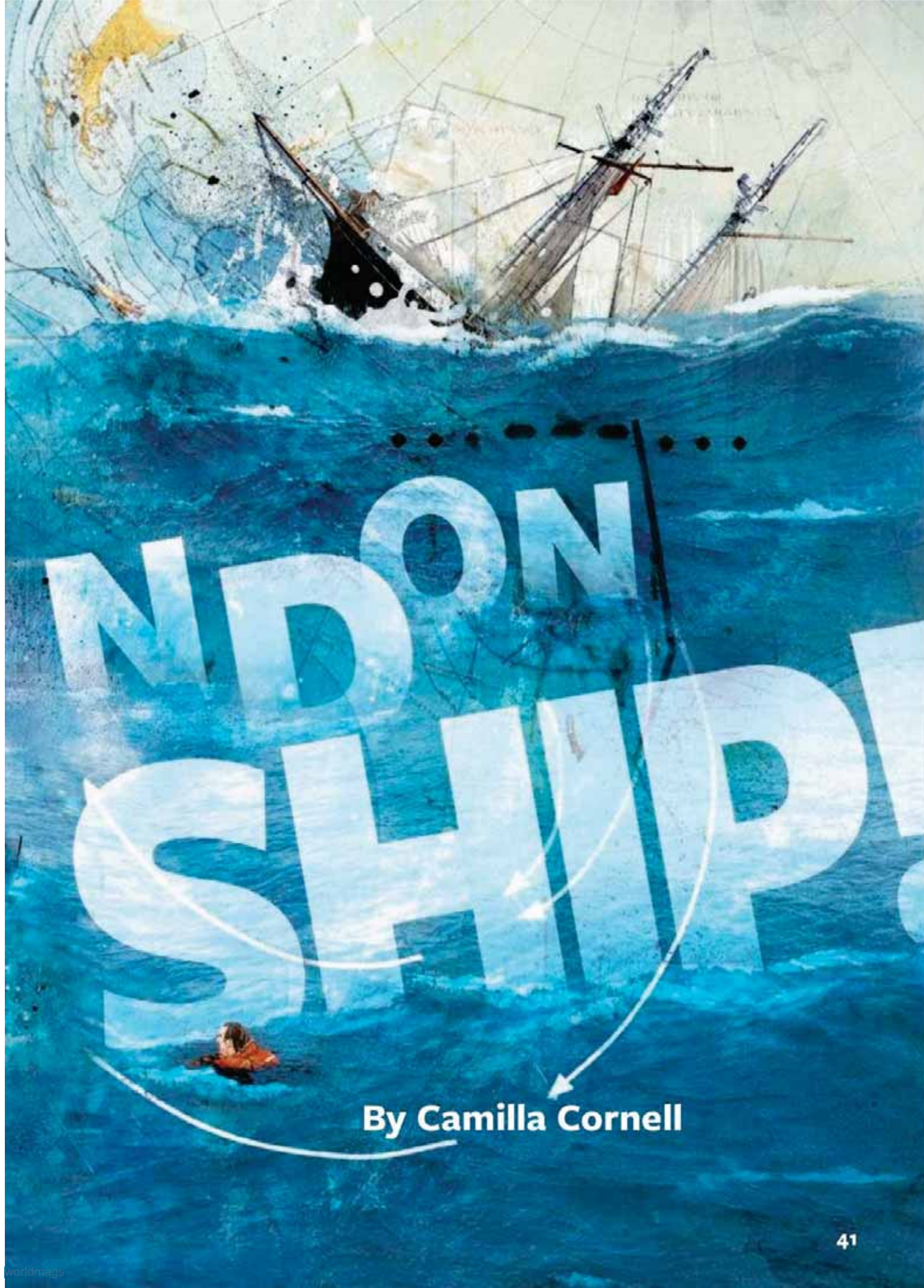


ILLUSTRATION: JANICE KUN/121 ART



By Camilla Cornell

In February 2010, the sailing vessel *Concordia* was off the coast of Brazil when it keeled over, spraying sea water high up the windows of Keaton Farwell's afternoon biology class. But Farwell wasn't the least bit afraid. In fact, she welcomed the distraction from her routine. "That's normal for a sailing ship," she says.

Farwell and her fellow adventurous teenagers on the *Concordia*—a custom-built three-masted tall ship—were in the Class Afloat program, based in Lunenburg, N.S. When her parents offered her the chance to finish Grade 12 in a floating school, Farwell had jumped aboard. And what a year for this Torontonion, who was then 17 years old: In her first five months she had hiked a caldera in the Azores, danced an Irish jig in Dublin, ridden a camel through the Sahara and distributed mosquito nets to a village in Senegal.

The *Concordia* was a working ship: Besides taking classes while traveling, the students had to become proficient sailors. So when the boat keeled over, "we were all excited to get on deck and start working," recalls Farwell, a practical girl with blunt-cut hair and a nose stud.

The ship righted itself, as expected, but then keeled over again—hard. Everything not bolted down went flying. This time the *Concordia* didn't come back up. Instead, the windows settled into the ocean and shattered from the pressure. Shockingly cold water poured into the classroom and

immediately, the tall ship began to sink.

Among the other students in the biology classroom was Dave Gunn, a lanky Calgarian, 17 years old at the time. He had joined the *Concordia* in Recife, Brazil, for its second semester, and had been aboard for only ten days. Oh, my God, this is actually going to happen, he thought. This ship is going to sink.

Trained as a lifeguard, Gunn tried to keep calm. Realizing the classroom door was now on the ceiling, he clambered onto a table and, with the help of teachers and crew, began hauling students onto the deck.

The scene on the ship was one of controlled pandemonium. Because the boat was on its side, "things were not like they are in a normal 'abandon ship' drill," says First Officer Kim Smith, who was down on his hands and knees, offering his back as a stepstool onto the deck. Several people braved the flooded emergency-equipment compartments to gather immersion suits and life jackets, passing them along a line of students and staff. "The water was up to their waists," says Smith, "and they had no way of knowing what was happening with the ship, so they wouldn't have been able to get out if it had gone down then."

The *Concordia* was 500 kilometres out to sea in the South Atlantic. The closest city was Rio de Janeiro. Hoping to send a radio message, Smith waded into the flooded bridge,

which was bristling with exposed wires. Finding the radio useless, he grabbed flares and a first-aid kit and joined David Teegarden, the ship's medical officer. The two of them made sure the students put on the retrieved survival gear.

With the *Concordia* partially submerged, half the life rafts were either under water or damaged. Crew members dove in to cut them free, but only four rafts were usable. "There was enough space for everybody—but just barely," says Smith.

The first life raft left the starboard side of the ship, near the stern, with 20 people in it, including Farwell. She had had to climb down the *Concordia*'s railings and leap into a bobbing eight-person raft, held steady by Gunn, which provided a bridge to a larger raft. "I was absolutely petrified," she says. "But I didn't have time to think about the fear."

Meanwhile, Smith and several others began to load the students onto two life rafts at the bow of the ship. Thirty minutes later, the evacuation was complete. Farwell's raft had disappeared from view. The other three rafts were grouped together, and Gunn's damaged eight-person raft became the bathroom station and storage place for supplies.

Stunned, the survivors watched as the majestic *Concordia*—their floating home—turned turtle and disappeared under the waves. Some students groaned. Others cried.

Some were injured: One person



had a concussion, and others had cuts and scrapes that were painfully irritated by the constant dousing with sea water. Teegarden had the worst injury—a dislocated shoulder.

Smith and the crew did their best to keep the students busy and focused, and had them counting and organizing rations, locating flash-

lights and other equipment and handing out seasickness medication. In a stroke of luck, the bo's'n, Geoff Byers, spotted the ship's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) in the water, dove in, grabbed it and swam back. It was functioning, he informed the others, and its distress signal should immediately alert search-and-rescue crews to their plight.

This news never reached Farwell's raft. Still separated from the others since soon after they had launched, her group was unaware the EPIRB had been found—and didn't have a clue about the fate of their shipmates.

Farwell did her best to be brave, but she couldn't help thinking that no one even knew their ship had sunk.

That first night was terrible, she says. Rain poured down and the ocean tossed the tiny raft relentlessly. Conditions were cold and cramped. Each of the raft's inhabitants spent a two-hour stint on either the front or the back of the raft, keeping watch for planes or ships. "You'd be out there by yourself in the pitch-black, looking at the ocean," says Farwell. "And there were swordfish underneath the raft. I thought one was going to come up and pop it." Overcome by fear, she found herself crying out for her parents.



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By dawn, the rain had stopped and spirits among the rafts' occupants had lifted. But Smith was fighting some deeper fears. Unable to locate Farwell's raft, he desperately hoped that all was well with the missing group. He also wondered why there was no sign of help on the way yet. Smith had been fairly certain it would take no more than eight hours for search and rescue to find the rafts. But as the day wore on, he began to question whether their distress signal had, in fact, been received.

Conditions were deteriorating in the rafts. The low canopies that were meant to protect the survivors from the sun now trapped a revolting slick of vomit and sea water. And the swells that hit the rafts with sickening frequency slammed the exhausted survivors into one another. "Your head would be hitting other people's heads," says Farwell. "It was just awful."

To make matters worse in Smith's group, halfway through the day, two inflatable compartments in one of the rafts collapsed. "So now we're in a swimming pool with a ring around the top," says Smith. "We were not looking forward to another night in the rafts."

♾ Finally, at about 8 p.m. on their

second day at sea, the *Concordia* survivors heard a welcome sound—the drone of an aircraft engine. Smith's group sent up a flare and, much to their relief, they saw another flare in the distance. Farwell's raft was still out there! The plane's lights blinked, showing that the life rafts had been spotted, and the occupants of the rafts cheered wildly.

But their ordeal wasn't over yet. That night, torrential rains beat down and the sea churned. There was no time for sleep. "We were bailing constantly," says Smith. The damaged raft "was like an accordion. It was just beating the crap out of us. We were bashing into each other and our skin was peeling off. We couldn't have taken much more. We were wondering, Where are our rescuers? What the hell is going on?"

At 3 a.m. on February 19, Smith's group spotted the lights of a freighter, the *Hokuetsu Delight*, sent by Brazilian authorities. Relief was followed by a fresh wave of doubt. Stretching 700 feet long and having almost no manoeuvrability, the enormous ship presented a whole new set of challenges. Given its size and the weather conditions, says Smith, "we didn't



know how we would ever be able to board.”

The freighter would have to position itself on the leeward of the rafts, to block the pounding waves. If it got too close, it risked damaging the rafts and spilling the survivors into the sea. Too far away and the survivors would be unable to reach the rope ladder leading up onto the ship.

For the next four hours, the *Hokuetsu* struggled to find the right position, while conditions in the rafts worsened further still. Those in the damaged raft were sitting in water up to their necks, and saltwater rashes

were burning their skin like flames.

When Gunn first caught sight of the ship, he had stripped out of his water-logged immersion suit, in the belief that they would be rescued shortly. But as he watched the *Hokuetsu* slowly manoeuvre into position, and minutes stretched into hours, he began to shiver. When the shivering abruptly stopped, his lifeguard training kicked in. “I knew I was probably in second-stage hypothermia,” he says. Two friends wrapped him in a thermal blanket and wedged him between them. Eventually, he warmed up.

When the *Hokuetsu* was finally ready, the sailors threw down lines to attach Smith's raft to the ship. "So then we had a 40,000-tonne mountain of steel attached to a little rubber raft," says Smith. "It could rip that raft apart. Any little movement of the vessel would detach the line." Nonetheless, one by one, the wobbly-legged survivors jumped for the rope ladder. The students went first—some of them crying in pain and from exhaustion and fear. They climbed the ladder, which led to a steep, narrow staircase that wound 60 feet up the side of the *Hokuetsu* to the deck. One girl collapsed just within reach of the rescuers. When all the students were on board, the teachers followed, and finally, the crew.

Once on deck, Smith was reassured to learn everyone in Farwell's raft had been rescued by another freighter, the *Crystal Pioneer*. The process of evacuation from that raft had gone more smoothly. The sailors on board the *Crystal Pioneer* had lowered a harness to the raft and hauled the occupants up to the freighter's deck one at a time.

Remarkably, all 64 of the students, teachers and crew aboard the *Concordia* had survived. And just a few months after their ordeal, 40 of the 48 students returned to the town of Lunenburg to finish their school year.

Farwell plans to return next year, when the Class Afloat program sets out again on a new ship. "I'm not finished with it yet!" she says.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Months after the sinking of the tall ship *Concordia*, questions about the disaster remain. Both the Transportation Safety Board of Canada and Barbados (under whose flag the ship sailed) have launched investigations. First Officer Kim Smith believes the ship was hit by a microburst, and evidence from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration seems to back him up.

A microburst occurs when a layer of dry air is channelled into a thunderstorm. The falling rain evaporates in the dry air, cooling and descending rapidly. The result is a localized downdraft of air that hits the water like a huge fist at speeds in excess of 65 kilometres an hour. The effect on the *Concordia* was to slam it over on its side, crippling it.

While Brazil's search-and-rescue efforts paid off, Smith, who continues to wonder why it took so long for a response to the distress signal, says: "Another ten hours and kids would have started to die."

