

A Model Master

A retired RCAF veteran's passion for model-building

BY SANDRA PHINNEY



JANICE BILODEAU

The year 1983 was rich with memorable firsts. Sally Ride—the first American female astronaut—joined the *Challenger* space shuttle on its second journey. Microsoft introduced Word for the first time, and the first mobile phone came into the world weighing in at 2.5 pounds and sold for \$3,995.

Closer to home, Jeanne Sauvé was designated to become Canada's first female Governor General in 1983; she assumed the role the following year.

For Alain Bilodeau (now living in St. Martin, near Meteghan, NS), 1983 was the year he joined the Canadian military. This was his first career, and would last for 31 years—much of it spent as an avionics technician.

When he signed up, Alain was living in Saguenay, QC and

had completed a year in CEGEP technical college. The 18 year-old had hoped to become an architect, but lack of funds prevented that; instead, he joined the RCAF.

"During this period of time with the military, I got married to Janice LeBlanc, the love of my life; had two amazing children; got transferred from Manitoba to British Columbia, and back and forth between Nova Scotia and Quebec," Alain says, adding, "and I had a chance to travel all over the world."

Then it happened. In 2009 Alain was deployed to Afghanistan. "This changed my life forever."

Recovery from PTSD has not been easy, but, in the process, Alain focused on his longtime passion for making model ships.

As a child, Alain enjoyed tinkering with pre-made kits but as he got older, he became frustrated by the lack of accuracy



Left: Alain built the *Cobequid Bay* from blueprints he made from photos of the vessel. Above: Alain replicating the *Terror*, one of Sir John Franklin's vessels.

and aesthetic details. Designing and building a ship from scratch was the only solution.

In 1993 his mother-in-law, Yvonne LeBlanc, asked him to make a model of the *Cobequid Bay* as a retirement gift for her husband, Dennis LeBlanc. He had spent the last 15 years of his working life as a fishery officer aboard the ship.

Alain was unable to source blueprints, but he convinced his father-in-law to take him on board the ship for a tour. Armed with photos he was able to capture, he created a blueprint of the ship and proceeded to build the model in his spare time.

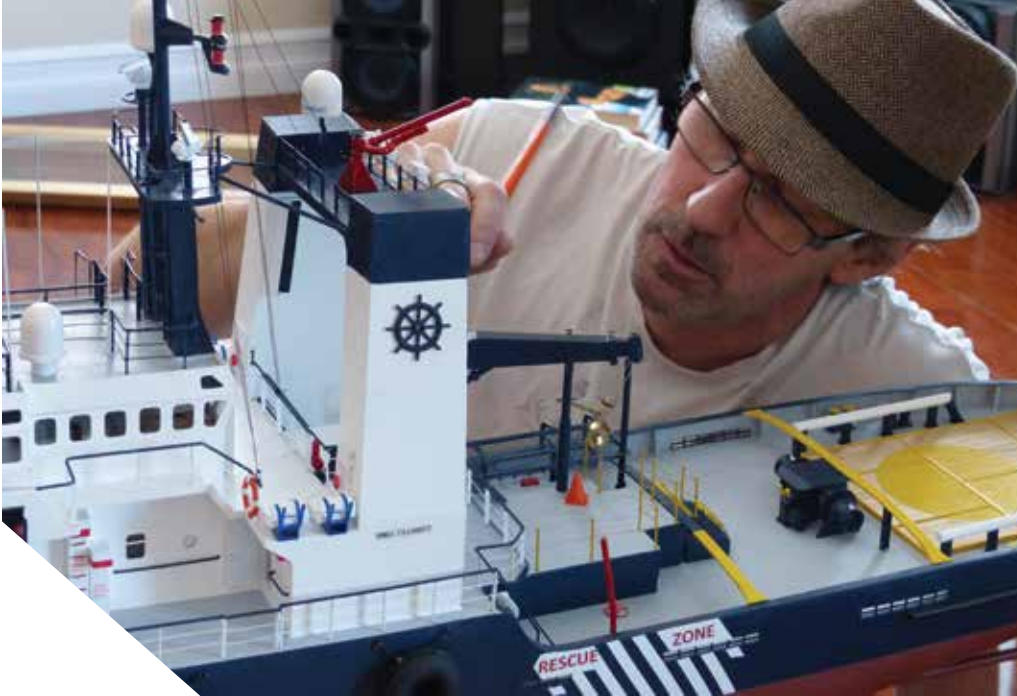
The retirement party was a huge hit, and fishery officers who were familiar with the ship were blown away by the level of detail and accuracy. Alain says, "I have to admit, I even managed to impress myself."

Bolstered by this success, he decided to build a replica of the *RMS Titanic*, "arguably the most famous ship in history." It ended up being six feet in length and took more than 3000 hours—spanning two years—to complete.

When Alain was ready to part with it, he posted photos on e-Bay. Joel Rosen, a private collector from New York, contacted him early in September of 2001. Eventually, a sale took place with the caveat that Alain would deliver the ship in person.

After spending hours poring over the details of the ship, his client asked Alain to build four tall ships.

Fast forward to 2008; Alain was transferred from Bagotville, PQ to Greenwood, NS. He and his wife, Janice had a home built in St. Martin along with a large barn; the top floor of the barn became a working studio.



Above, from left: Alain works on details of the *Ryan Leet*; the completed *RMS Titanic*; detail of work on one of Sir John Franklin's two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, which were lost along with all hands in a failed search for the Northwest Passage.

Word of mouth spread; orders flowed in. While commuting back and forth to Greenwood, Alain dreamed of devoting 100 per cent of his work-day to building model ships.

A year later, he got the call. He was Afghanistan-bound.

"I believe that everyone who goes to war has at least one life-changing moment and I am no different. It is easy to understand and be empathetic towards someone with a broken arm; everyone can see the cast," Alain says, "But the symptoms of mental health issues are much more ambiguous and difficult to identify, and the road to recovery is complicated."

Since his release from the military in 2014, he's spent untold hours in his studio. "When I go there, I'm in my world and no one can hurt me. I feel free. I'm safe." Living in a rural area close to the ocean helps, and the support of his wife and family have been immense.

While Alain was on the road to recovery in 2011—and still commuting back and forth to Greenwood—Gilles Theriault from A. F. Theriault & Sons Ltd. contacted him with an order



One of the models Alain built of the *M/V American United*, a fire boat operated by Massport Fire and Rescue in Boston, Massachusetts.

to build a model of the company's *Fireboat 31* for the Massport Fire and Rescue at Boston Logan International Airport. Gilles and his staff wanted a replica to take to boat shows.

Massport Fire and Rescue's Chief Bob Donahue described *Fireboat 31* as "a multi-hazard, all purpose craft customer-built for new age risks and threats as well as for the unique marine environment of Boston Harbor and the Massachusetts coast."

Donahue also explained that the boat came to be named the *M/V American United*. "It was born from the idea that we wanted a working and living tribute to those lost on 9/11 as two of the aircraft (American and United Airlines) departed Boston Logan International Airport on that fateful day, striking World Trade Centre Towers in New York City. This gave the cities of Boston and New York a special bond."

After 9/11, A. F. Theriault ordered six more models of the *M/V American United* from Alain to give as gifts to the Boston Fire Department. They are now prominently displayed in the Massachusetts Port Authority, Boston Logan International Airport, and in the offices of Massport team leaders.

Chief Donahue later sent an email to Alain which said in part, "Our thanks to you and to Bilodeau Custom Model Company. Because of your skill, commitment to excellence and delivery of an exceptional product, we will never forget!"

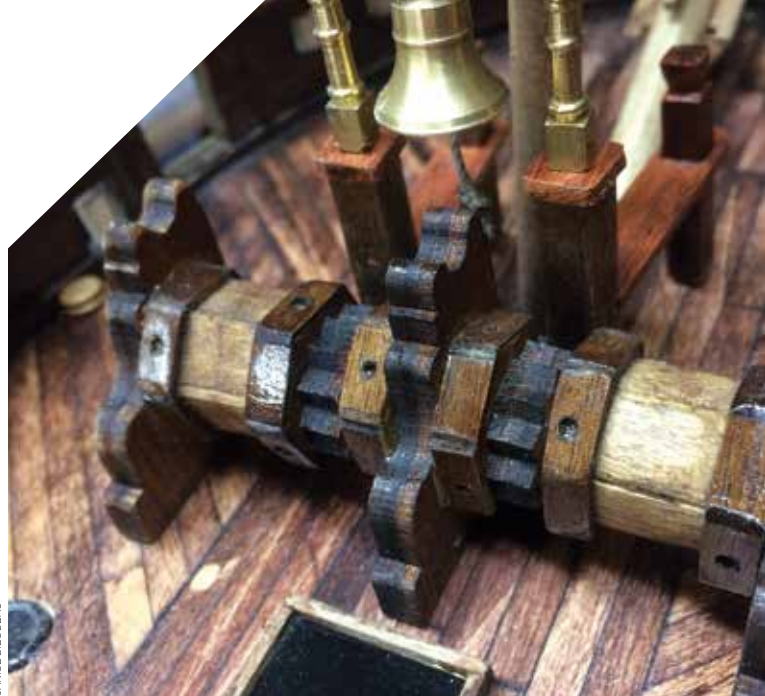
It is emotionally charged projects like this which give deep meaning to Alain's work.

After the fireboat models, Alain built a replica of the *Ryan Leet*, a deep-sea tug, for Sean Leet, the CEO of Horizon Maritime. Ryan requested the model in memory of his late brother, for whom the ship was named several years ago.

"Al takes so much care in understanding what he is doing and why he is doing it. In today's world, that is increasingly uncommon," Sean said, adding, "We could have gone to a mass production company in the UK or China for a model but it just didn't feel right. So there was no question that Al should be the one to build the model of the *Ryan Leet*."



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When Sean approached Darrell Sheppard and Chris Pitts (president and vice president of Secunda Canada, that now owns the *Ryan Leet*) for the plans of the ship, they not only gave him the plans, but also the original ship's bell.

"The model sits proudly in the main corridor of our office next to the original ship's bell," Sean says, "and this bell is rung when we have a significant event in the company, such as winning a new contract."

Alain was discharged from the military in 2014. Now he's fulfilling his dream of making models full-time. While doing so, he often cranks up his favourite tunes by musicians such as the Bee Gees, Celine Dion, and Styx.

In the past several months, however, he's also been listening to the audio version of *The Terror*, a novel written by Dan Simmons. It's a fictionalized version of Sir John Franklin's doomed expedition to the Northwest Passage in 1846 aboard *HMS Erebus* and *Terror*.

That seems like quite a departure from pop and rock music—but he's immersing himself in the story because he's making models of those two ships. The wrecks were discovered in 2014 and 2016.

In February of 2017, Alain was commissioned by the Arctic Research Foundation (ARF) to build not only one model of each vessel, but three. The models will find permanent homes within the ARF's archives library and founders' homes. Alain anticipates completing all six models by the end of this year.

Does the master model maker have any regrets about joining the military back in 1983? "No regrets. I have a lovely wife, two fantastic kids and I'm doing something I love to do."

Reflecting on his time in Afghanistan, he adds: "Working on the Chinooks [helicopters] and with unbelievably hard-working men and women from around the world has been the best experience of my military career. I'm glad to have had the chance to serve my country in this capacity."

Pausing for a moment, he says, "My life is complete."



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A BEAUTY OF A BOAT

If you happen to be at the main wharf in Meteghan, NS, you may see *Beausoleil III*: a boat that was built to order at A.F. Theriault for fisherman Roger LeBlanc. Should you actually meet up with Roger, he'll tell you that boat is his pride and joy. "I fish hard with it. It's part of the family and it means the world to me."

Roger also has a 50-inch model of the *Beausoleil III*, made by Alain Bilodeau. It's on display in his man-cave over his garage and shares space with a pool table, comfy furniture, a bar, and scores of mounted birds, animal heads, and antlers.

"This model is priceless," Roger says. "When Alain agreed to make me a model, it made my arms tingle. I spent a lot of time watching him build this. It was like having a baby."

Pausing for a minute, the seasoned fisherman clears his throat and adds, "They can take everything away from you but memories. This is part of my life; I can relive it every day."