

The Battle for Bell Island:

The U-boat Attacks at Wabana, Bell Island in the Fall of 1942 and their Impact on the People of Newfoundland

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The fall of 1942 was a difficult period for the people of Newfoundland. In the space of two months, four ore carriers were torpedoed at anchor at Wabana, Bell Island, killing 69 men and the Sydney to Port-aux-Basques passenger ferry *Caribou* was sunk in the Gulf of St. Lawrence with the loss of 136 people, including women and children. While the loss of the *Caribou* was a human tragedy, the sinkings of the ore carriers at Bell Island not only had strategic repercussions, but the sheer audacity of the attacks clearly demonstrated to Newfoundlanders that they were at the front lines of the Battle of the Atlantic.

During the Second World War, Canadian and American troops were stationed about Newfoundland in huge numbers. The Canadians arrived in 1940 to protect the Newfoundland Airport at Gander Lake and the trans-Atlantic seaplane base at Botwood.¹ By 1942, Force W, under the command of Major-General L.F. Page was ensconced in Lesters' Field on, what was then, the outskirts of St. John's. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) arrived in force in May 1941 in the form of the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF) under Commodore Leonard Murray to provide protection to the vital trans-Atlantic convoys to Britain.² Shortly thereafter, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) under Group Captain C.M. McEwen established an airbase at Torbay just north of St. John's.³ The Americans arrived in January 1941, as a result of the

Anglo-American Leased Bases agreement which gave the United States base sites in British territory in the Western Hemisphere. They established army, naval and air bases at St. John's, Argentia, and Stephenville and also had forces at Gander and Torbay and eventually Goose Bay, Labrador.⁴

Newfoundlanders accepted this "friendly invasion" and felt they were well-prepared and protected. Blackout regulations were in place and St. John's and its environs bristled with anti-aircraft gun emplacements. The Narrows were safeguarded with boom defences and anti-torpedo nets, and guns were in place on Signal Hill, Fort Amherst and at Cape Spear. The Newfoundland Airport (i.e. Gander) and the Botwood seaplane base were well guarded and the Newfoundland Rangers and local coast-watchers reported any strange ships, aircraft or lights. This sense of security was somewhat dampened late in the afternoon of 3 March 1942, when three explosions rocked the Southside Hills of St. John's. Authorities soon learned that a U-boat had shot torpedoes at the Narrows, hitting underneath Fort Amherst on one side and North Head on the other.⁵ Nevertheless, people took this in stride; the war still seemed to be "out there" in the stormy wastes of the North Atlantic. The Canadians had sunk U-501 east of Greenland the previous September and in March; the Americans destroyed *U-656* 40 kilometres south of the Avalon Peninsula⁶ and *U-503* off the Virgin Rocks.⁷ However, unknown to the people of Newfoundland, the local authorities were nervous. The general commanding the American forces in Newfoundland, Major-General G.C. Brant, felt that an attack on Newfoundland was "very probable."⁸ Indeed, evidence given to a US Congressional hearing in 1944 suggested that Hitler planned to attack Newfoundland as part of a campaign against the United States.⁹ As a precaution, the Newfoundland

Government asked the occupying forces to develop Scorched Earth plans¹⁰ for the various military facilities in case the Germans did invade Newfoundland. The authorities feared that if the Nazis occupied the island, the whole east coast of Canada and the United States would be threatened. The plans were kept from the general public but even then, by the time they were issued to the other service heads, it seemed to everyone that Newfoundland was under siege.

It started on the night of 4 September 1942, when *U-513*, under the command of *Korvettenkapitän* Rolf Rugeberg, followed the ore carrier *Evelyn B* into the Wabana anchorage in Conception Bay. Spending the night submerged in twenty metres of water, Rugeberg rose to periscope depth the next morning and under the guns of the Bell Island Battery, sank two ships, *SS Saganaga* and *SS Lord Strathcona*. Slightly damaged by a collision with *Strathcona*, *U-513* left the scene; once again trailing *Evelyn B*. Twenty-nine men were killed in the attack, all aboard *Saganaga*.¹¹ Nothing appeared in the press about this incident, no doubt the result of the strict censorship regime in place, but news quickly spread.¹² The public was shaken because the attack had occurred in broad daylight, in an inshore protected anchorage. The Battle of the Atlantic had suddenly struck home. The acting FONF (Flag Officer Newfoundland Force) Captain E. R. Mainguy complained that while losses in convoys were accepted as "the fortunes of war", the public viewed such sinkings so close to St. John's as the result of "dereliction of duty on the part of the Navy." However, Mainguy's primary concern was that if the U-boats decided to make "resolute attacks" in coastal waters, Newfoundland's trade could be brought to "a virtual standstill." He assigned escorts from the 71st and 73rd Motor Launch Flotillas based in Harbour Grace to patrol Conception Bay and protect the

ore carriers while in transit and at anchor. In addition, Mainguy instituted a regular schedule of ore convoys between Wabana and Sydney, Nova Scotia. By the end of September, eleven ore carriers, along with eighteen other vessels, had been successfully convoyed between the two ports.¹³ Ultimately the fervour died down but before the attack faded from public view, tragedy struck on the other side of the island. In the early hours of 14 October, the Port-aux-Basques to North Sydney passenger ferry *SS Caribou* was sunk 200 kilometres west of Port-aux-Basques.¹⁴

SS Caribou left Sydney for her last trip at approximately 9:30 PM on 13 October accompanied by the Bangor-class minesweeper HMCS *Grandmere*. Early the next morning, *U-69* under *Kapitänleutnant* Ulrich Gräf, spotted *Caribou* "belching heavy smoke" but misidentified both the 2222-ton *Caribou* and *Grandmere* as a 6500-ton passenger freighter and a "two-stack destroyer." Twenty minutes later, a lone torpedo hit *Caribou* on her starboard side and she started to sink. Pandemonium ensued as passengers, thrown from their bunks by the explosion, rushed topside to the lifeboat stations only to find several lifeboats and rafts had either been destroyed in the explosion or could not be launched.¹⁵

Meanwhile, *Grandmere* spotted *U-69* in the dark and turned to ram. Gräf, still under the impression he was facing a destroyer rather than a minesweeper, crash dived and evaded a number of depth charge attacks over the next couple of hours while slowly leaving the area. Three hours after the attack, *Grandmere* gave up the hunt and began to pick up survivors. Unfortunately, they were few: of the 237 people aboard, only 103 were found alive and two died shortly thereafter.¹⁶ Of the forty-six-man crew, mostly Newfoundlanders, only fifteen remained. Five families were decimated: of the Tapper family (five dead), the Topper family (four), the

Allen family (three), the Skinner family (three), and the Tavernor family (the captain and his two sons); as the press truthfully reported, "Many Families [were] Wiped Out."¹⁷ The St. John's *Evening Telegram* stated that the disaster left twenty-one widows and fifty-one orphans in the Channel/Port-aux-Basques area of Newfoundland.¹⁸

Unlike the sinkings at Bell Island, the censors allowed news coverage of the *Caribou* disaster. We can speculate that the huge loss of life would have made the tragedy impossible to keep quiet, and thus that it was better to let the press report the attack rather than invite accusations of cover-up. Even more so, while the sinking of the *Caribou* was tragic, it had no real strategic impact on the war effort. The ship was simply an unfortunate target of opportunity. This was not the case with the ore carriers at Wabana. The mines on Bell Island supplied the vital iron ore for Cape Breton's steel mills which accounted for one third of Canada's steel production.¹⁹ If the Germans interrupted this flow of ore, even temporarily, Canada's war output could be seriously affected. To speculate further, advertising just how successful the September attack had been might have invited a repeat. Unfortunately, censorship or not, a repeat is exactly what happened.

At approximately 3 AM on 2 November, *U-518* under the command of *Kapitänleutnant* Friedrich Wissmann, rounded the southern end of Bell Island and entered "The Tickle," as the Wabana anchorage was locally known. Silhouetted against a searchlight, he found several ore carriers at anchor and a half hour later, fired one torpedo at the 3000-ton *Anna T*. It missed, passed under the bow of SS *Flyingdale*, and exploded ashore at the loading dock, awakening the whole of Bell Island. Now with the anchorage fully alerted, Wissmann quickly fired two torpedoes

at *SS Rose Castle*. This ship had had a narrow escape the previous month when *U-69*, fresh from sinking *Caribou*, fired a torpedo at it just outside St. John's harbour. That device had been a dud. This time it was not, and *Rose Castle* sank, taking twenty-eight of her crew with her, five of whom were Newfoundlanders. The Free French vessel *PLM 27* was next, and she sank almost immediately after being hit, with the loss of twelve men. In the ensuing confusion, and despite the presence of a corvette and two Fairmile patrol boats, *U-518* escaped on the surface in the darkness. In a ten-minute attack, two ships, along with forty men, had been lost.²⁰

The Governor of Newfoundland, Admiral Sir Humphrey Walwyn, was outraged at the sinkings. He had been on a hillside overlooking the anchorage the previous day and was horrified to see two ore ships at anchor in a calm sea awaiting a loading berth. Walwyn called FONF's Chief of Staff (COS) Capt. F.L. Houghton as soon as he returned to St. John's and told him that he thought "it was madness to let ships lie unprotected" at the anchorage. Walwyn felt it was wiser to leave them in St. John's until a berth was vacant.²¹ Captain of the Port (COP) Capt. C.M.R. Schwerdt made a similar suggestion several months earlier, but it was apparently received "somewhat casually by the Canadian Naval authorities²²." The British Dominions Office was also critical of naval authorities, unfairly charging that, despite the sinkings in September, nothing had been done to protect the anchorage and concluded that the incident "reflect[ed] little credit on those in charge."

In truth, the newly appointed FONF, Commodore H.E. Reid, was aware of the risk and knew that anti-submarine protection at Wabana was inadequate. However, he had little choice but to do the best he could with what he had if the vital ore shipments to Sydney were to continue before the ice set in for the winter. The

greater threat was while the ore carriers were at sea, and despite the strain on his resources, Reid had maintained the regular schedule of Wabana/Sydney convoys, a total of sixteen being run each way during October. Eventually, net protection was installed off the loading piers, and provisions were made to allow only two ships to load at a time while being protected by escort vessels.²³ However, the damage had been done. As Mainguy observed after the September sinkings, while people were willing to accept losses in the storm tossed North Atlantic or even in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, painful though they may be, the sinkings at Wabana shattered the public's sense of security. If enemy submarines could sink shipping in a shallow, defended anchorage and escape unscathed, despite the presence of Allied land, air and naval forces, just how secure was Newfoundland? It is probably fortunate that Canada's "Scorched Earth Policy" for Newfoundland was not made public until 1998.

The year 1942 was extremely challenging for the Allies. During the first six months, the Japanese had advanced almost unchecked throughout the western Pacific. Rommel had the British on the ropes in North Africa, and *Kriegsmarine* head Admiral Karl Dönitz's U-boats had moved across the Atlantic and were decimating shipping within sight of land from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico. Whereas the Americans stopped the Japanese advance at the Battle of Midway, and the British halted Rommel at El Alamein, Dönitz's U-boats continued to exact a terrible toll on Allied shipping. Newfoundlanders witnessed the results of this carnage on a regular basis in the form of damaged ships and ragged survivors. However, what brought home to Newfoundlanders that they were really at the front lines of the Atlantic war were the two U-boat attacks at Bell Island in the fall of 1942. That these attacks still resonate with people almost seventy years later is

evidenced by the television and radio coverage, books, and newspaper and magazine articles, that still appear on the event, and by the number of sports divers from all over the world that visit the site yearly.²⁴ As recently as June 2011, “The U-Boat Attacks on the Bell Island Ore Ships in 1942” were proclaimed by the Newfoundland and Labrador government as an Event of Provincial Significance.

¹ After the fall of France in May 1940, Canada posted bombers (RCAF No.10 Squadron) at Gander and the 1st Battalion of the Black Watch of Canada at Botwood. Force W based at Lester's Field, St. John's arrived soon after. The RCN followed in October with an examination service which eventually evolved into the Newfoundland Defense Force. For an examination the Canadian Army presence in Newfoundland see C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 178-180 and Robert Kavanagh, “W Force: The Canadian Army and the Defence of Newfoundland in the Second World War” (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1995).

² For the most recent examination of the Royal Canadian Navy base HMCS *Avalon* at St. John's see Paul Collins “From Defended Harbour to Trans-Atlantic Base” in *St. John's Occupied: A Social History of a City at War, 1939-1945*, Steven High, ed. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 81 - 109.

³ For an examination of the Royal Canadian Air Force in Newfoundland see W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force*. Volume II (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

⁴ For the most recent examination of the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement and its impact on Newfoundland see Steven High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere, 1940-1967* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), See also Peter Neary, “Newfoundland and the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement of 27 March 1941,” *Canadian Historical Review*, LXVII, No. 4 (December 1986), pp. 491-519.

⁵ This incident was not reported in the newspapers and, indeed, many people did not learn of the source of the explosions until after the war. Training and test firing of guns were regular occurrences and the explosions would probably have, at least initially, been dismissed as such. There is also some question as to whether two or three torpedoes were fired at the Narrows. Rowher claims that only two were fired, while the FONF (Flag Officer Newfoundland Force) in his report wrote that three explosions were heard. It is possible that the third explosion was actually an echo from the first hit under Fort Amherst. Jürgen Rowher, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1983), 82. Library and Archives Canada, FONF, RG 24, Vol. 11,953, file 1-1-1, Vol. 1, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, March 1942. See also LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 6901, file 8910-166/25 vol. 1, FONF to NSHQ, 5 March, 1942.

⁶LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11,951, CTF 24 to FONF, 3 February 1942.

⁷Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunters, 1939-1942* (New York: Random House, 1996), 512.

⁸LAC, FONF, RG24, vol. 11, 951, Brant to Admiral Commanding Newfoundland, 24 December 1941.

⁹"Says Newfoundland Was Included in Hitler's Plans," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 13 July 1944.

¹⁰ LAC, RG24, Vol. 11,927, MS 1400-4, vol. 1, "Instructions Issued To Certain Colonial Dependencies on 'Scorched Earth Policy'" and *Ibid.*, Emerson to FONF, 11 March 1942. In May 1998, an Ottawa journalist wrote a series of sensationalized articles whereby he claimed that during the Second World War Canadian naval authorities had Top Secret "Scorched Earth Plans" to burn St. John's to the ground in the event that the Germans tried to occupy it. In fact, naval authorities, with the full knowledge of the Newfoundland Government, developed "Denial Plans" which would have seen only naval facilities and ordnance destroyed. For an in-depth discussion of the RCN's denial plans for St. John's see Paul Collins, "'Canada's Plan to Torch St. John's' during the Second World War: Upper Canadian Arrogance or Tabloid Journalism?" *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, XXIV, No. 2 (Fall 2009), 261-270. See also Daniel LeBlanc, "Canada's plan to torch St. John's," *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 30, 1998, Daniel LeBlanc, "Upper-Canadian Arrogance," *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 31, 1998 and Kerry Badgley, "Rigorously applied in practice"; A scorched earth policy for Canada and Newfoundland during the Second World War," *The Archivist*, No. 446, 1998, 38-43.

¹¹Jak Mallman Showell, *U-Boats at War: Landings on Hostile Shores* (London, Ian Allan, 1973; 2nd ed., Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 38-39; and Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada: German Submarines in Canadian Waters* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 116. See also Steve Neary, *The Enemy on Our Doorstep: The German Attacks at Bell Island, Newfoundland, 1942* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1994), 7-34.

¹²It would have been impossible to contain the news of the attack as many of the survivors had been rescued and cared for by the local residents and then transported to St. John's. For a discussion of censorship measures undertaken in Newfoundland, see Jeff A. Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 124-125.

¹³LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11,953, file 1-1-1, vol.1, FONF, monthly report, September 1942.

¹⁴LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11,953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, FONF, monthly report, October 1942.

¹⁵Douglas How, *Night of the Caribou* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1988), 46-47.

¹⁶How, *Night of the Caribou*, 72-73 and 85.

¹⁷Hadley, *U-boats against Canada*, 138.

¹⁸"The Town Cast Down in Grief: Caribou Disaster Leaves Twenty-one Widows and Fifty-one Orphans in Port aux Basques and Channel: Funeral of Six Victims Is Held," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 23 October 1942.

¹⁹ David MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 24-25, and A.R.M. Lower, "Transition to Atlantic Bastion." in MacKay, R.A. (Ed.). *Newfoundland: Economic, Diplomatic and Strategic Studies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), 493.

²⁰Again, it would have been impossible to keep this attack from the public for the reasons previously mentioned. Mallman Showell, *U-Boats at War: Landings on Hostile Shores*, 37-38; and Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada*, 152. See also Neary, *Enemy on Our Doorstep*, 49-94.

²¹The National Archives/PRO, DO 35/1354, Governor of Newfoundland to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, quarterly report, 31 December 1942.

²²*Ibid.*, Dominion Affairs Office, memorandum, 28 January 1943.

²³LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11,953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, FONF, monthly report, October 1942.

²⁴“U-boat Captain’s Daughter Visits St. John’s: 29 Men Died When Marita Collings's Father Sank 2 Ships Near Bell Island,” CBC News, July 8, 2010; “The U-Boat Battles of Bell Island,” *Diver Magazine*, June 2010; “The Fight to Preserve Desecrated War Graves,” W5, CTV News, November 7, 2009; Marjorie Coakwell, *In the Mouth of the Dragon: The Story of a Time When War Was Not So Far Away*, Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2010; Paul Collins, *Dangerous Waters* (Jespersen Press, 1996); Steve Neary, *The Enemy at Our Doorstep*.