

The Battle for Bell Island: The U-boat Attacks at Bell Island During The Second World War and Their Impact on The People of Newfoundland.

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This fall marks the 70th anniversary of two of the most audacious U-boat attacks in the Western Atlantic during the Second World War. They occurred two months apart but both took place off Bell Island in Conception Bay, not far from here, and they dramatically changed the way Newfoundlanders viewed the war. To truly appreciate the impact these two attacks had on Newfoundlanders' sense of security, one must put them in the context of the war situation at the time. The year 1942 was challenging for the Allies: During the first six months, the Japanese had advanced almost unchecked throughout the western Pacific. German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox, had Commonwealth Forces on the run 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 British Forces halted Rommel at El Alamein, Dönitz's U-boats continued to exact a terrible toll on Allied shipping in the Western Atlantic. Even though Newfoundlanders witnessed the consequences of this carnage in the form of damaged ships and ragged survivors, we still felt reasonably safe, and why not?

By the fall of 1942, Newfoundland was literally an armed camp. The Canadian Army had arrived in 1940 to protect the Newfoundland Airport at Gander Lake and the trans-Atlantic seaplane base at Botwood. Shortly thereafter, Force W, under the command of Major-General L.F. Page was encamped in Lesters' Field on, what was then, the outskirts of St. John's. In May 1941, the Royal Canadian Navy established the

Newfoundland Escort Force at St. John's under Commodore Leonard Murray to provide naval protection to the vital trans-Atlantic convoys to Britain. In October 1941, the Royal Canadian Air Force under Group Captain C.M. McEwen established RCAF station *Torbay* just north of the city. Added to this, the *Edmund B Alexander* with 1000 American servicemen aboard arrived at St. John's with great fanfare in January 1941, as a result of the famous Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement. In no time, the United States was building army, naval and air bases from coast to coast.

Blackout regulations were in place for many parts of Newfoundland, and St. John's and its environs bristled with anti-aircraft gun emplacements. The Narrows were safeguarded with boom defenses and anti-torpedo nets, and guns were sited on Signal Hill, Fort Amherst and at Cape Spear. Fixed and mobile gun emplacements were also set up at important anchorages and strategic points throughout the Island and in Labrador, and radar and radio-direction finding sites were established all along the coast. In addition, the Newfoundland Rangers and local coast-watchers reported any strange ships, aircraft or lights.

Still, local military authorities felt that an attack on Newfoundland was "not only possible...but very probable," and not without reason. As early as July 1940, authorities had received intelligence that U-boats were going to set up an advance base at Cape Bauld at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula; in January 1942, a US shore battery at Logy Bay reported a large ship about eight kilometers distant launching an aircraft; and in March 1942, a U-boat shot torpedoes at the Narrows, hitting underneath Fort Amherst on one side and North Head on the other; three months later, St. John's was put on

“yellow” alert as intelligence suggested that an air raid was imminent. Fortunately, no attack occurred.

Actually, military officials felt that the Newfoundland Airport was the Germans’ most likely target. Experience during the ill-fated Norwegian campaign demonstrated that if the Nazis “were given six hours on a piece of land...to establish an air base they could never be dislodged,” and if they got a foothold in Newfoundland, the whole east coast of Canada and the United States could be threatened. Authorities viewed Lewisporte as the most likely insertion point for any enemy force intent on capturing the Newfoundland Airport. To forestall this possibility, Canadian forces were stationed there and Newfoundland Commissioner, Sir Wilfrid Woods arranged for an all-night telegraph watch to immediately alert the Airport should the enemy land. In addition, Canadian troops drew up demolition plans for the Newfoundland Railway and also guarded certain focal points along the line, in the event that an enemy force tried to seize one or more locomotives.

Military command was further concerned about the runway at Harbour Grace which was long enough to accommodate enemy aircraft. Commissioner Woods recommended that large boulders be placed along the ground to block it. As a last resort, the Newfoundland Government asked the resident forces to develop Scorched Earth Plans in case the Germans overwhelmed local defenses. Regardless, for the most part, Fortress Newfoundland seemed well and truly secured. However, this all changed on September 5, 1942.

It started on the night of 4 September, when U-513, under the command of *Korvettenkapitän* Rolf Rüggeberg, followed the ore carrier *Evelyn B* into the Wabana

anchorage off Bell Island. Deciding to spend the night submerged in twenty-five metres of water, Rüggeberg rose to periscope depth the next morning in search of targets. At first, he spied *SS Drakepool* moored at the loading dock, but rather than attack immediately, Rüggeberg decided to move further into the anchorage. Under the guns of the Bell Island Battery, he sighted two ships, *SS Saganaga* and *SS Lord Strathcona*. Shortly thereafter, Rüggeberg launched two torpedoes at *Saganaga* but these misfired and sank to the bottom. The U-boat lost depth control and briefly broke surface, at the same time, colliding with *Lord Strathcona*. Regaining control, Rüggeberg fired his two stern torpedoes at *Saganaga*. These hit the ship on her port side, breaking her back, and she quickly sank. In the meantime, figuring that they were next, the crew of the *Lord Strathcona* abandoned ship. Rüggeberg lined up on *Strathcona* and loosed his two bow tubes which hit the ship after a 30 second run. In a welter of escaping steam from her ruptured boilers, the *Lord Strathcona* slipped below the waves in a minute and a half. Damaged in the collision with *Strathcona*, and now under fire from the Bell Island Battery and the *Evelyn B*, which had also manned her guns, U-513 quickly made her escape. Twenty-nine men were killed in the attack, all aboard *Saganaga*.

While the strict censorship regime adopted at the beginning of the war prevented anything appearing in the press, news quickly spread. The Battle of the Atlantic had suddenly come close to home. The public was shaken because the attack had occurred in broad daylight, in an inshore, protected anchorage twenty minutes from St. John's. The acting 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, NS. By the end of September, eleven ore carriers, along with eighteen other vessels, had been successfully convoyed between these two ports.

To possibly calm public fears, Canadian and American forces plus the local Civil Defense organization conducted combined maneuvers later in the month. The exercise took the form of a mock landing some distance outside St. John’s and thoroughly tested the defence preparedness of the local command. Unfortunately, whatever goodwill this exercise created was negated the following month by the sinking of the Sydney to Port-aux-Basque passenger ferry *SS Caribou*.

Early in the morning of 14 October, U-69 under the command of *Kapitänleutnant* Ulrich Gräf spotted *Caribou* and her escort HMCS *Grandmere* in the moonlight and after shadowing the pair for three hours, hit *Caribou* on her starboard side with a lone torpedo. The ship quickly sank, leaving many swimming for their lives in the freezing waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. *Grandmere* attacked the U-boat over the next couple of hours, but having achieved no results gave up the hunt and began to pick up survivors. By this time, of the 237 men, women and children aboard *Caribou*, only 103 were found alive and two died shortly thereafter. Of the forty-six-man crew, mostly Newfoundlanders from the Channel/Port-aux-Basques area, only fifteen remained. Five families were decimated: the Tappers (five dead), Toppers (four), Allens (three), Skinners (three), and

the Tavernors (the captain and his two sons). The St. John's *Evening Telegram* reported that the disaster left twenty-one widows and fifty-one orphans in the Channel/Port-aux-Basques area of Newfoundland.

Notably, unlike the attack at Bell Island, the censors allowed news coverage of the *Caribou* disaster. The huge loss of life would have made the tragedy impossible to keep quiet, and thus it was better to let the press report the attack rather than invite accusations of a cover-up, especially after the September attacks. 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. If the Germans interrupted this flow of ore, even temporarily, Canada's war output could be seriously affected. Consequently, advertising the success of the September attack could invite a repeat. Unfortunately, censorship or not, that 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." 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 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 something of a charmed life to this point. Not only had she been moored at the loading dock during the September attack, but she'd also had a narrow escape when U-69, fresh from sinking *Caribou*, fired a torpedo at her

southeast of Ferryland on the Southern Shore. The torpedo failed to explode. This time they didn't, 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 little more time than it takes to tell this story, two ships, along with forty men, were lost.

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 Naval Command as soon as he returned to St. John's and told them that he thought it was "madness" to let ships lie unprotected off Bell Island. Walwyn felt it was wiser to leave them in St. John's until a berth was vacant. Captain of the Port of St. John's C.M.R. Schwerdt, had made a similar recommendation several months earlier, but it was apparently received "somewhat casually by the Canadian Naval authorities." The British Dominions Office was also critical of naval authorities, unfairly charging that, despite the attack in September, nothing had been done to protect the anchorage, suggesting that the incident "reflect[ed] little credit on those in charge."

In truth, the newly appointed FONF, Commodore H.E. Reid, 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 without loss during October.

Ultimately, net protection was installed off the loading piers, and provisions made to allow only two ships to load at a time while being protected by escort vessels. However, the damage was done. As Mainguy observed after the September sinkings, people were willing to accept losses in North Atlantic convoys, or even in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, painful though they may be, but the attacks at Wabana shattered the public's complacent sense of security. If enemy submarines could torpedo shipping in a shallow, inshore, defended anchorage, and then escape unseen and unscathed – twice! - despite the presence of Allied land, air and naval forces, just how secure was Newfoundland? It is probably fortunate that the Canada's "Scorched Earth Policy" for Newfoundland was not made public until 1998.

The U-boat attacks at Bell Island were not the first sinkings in Newfoundland waters during the Second World War, nor were they the most tragic in human terms, as evidenced by the *Caribou* loss. But these attacks, above anything else, brought home to Newfoundlanders that they really were at the front lines of the Atlantic war. That these events still resonate with people seventy years later is confirmed by the number of television, radio, newspaper and magazine articles, not to mention books, that still appear on the attacks, and the number of sports divers from all over the world that visit the site yearly. In recognition of this, in June 2011, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador officially designated the U-boat attacks on the ore carriers at Bell Island in the fall of 1942 as an Event of Provincial Significance.