

CANADA AND THE SEA: 1600 – 1918 (contd.)

(Contd. from Part 1).....”-although, somewhat ironically, at about the same time it was given permission to assume the title of “Royal Canadian Navy.” Naval matters in Canada were at a standstill. “



"Bless 'em all -- the long, and the short, and the tall"

A photograph dated November 1910 shows perhaps the smallest and the tallest of the new recruits to the Canadian Naval Service. "Only strong, healthy and well educated men and boys" were accepted and, initially, recruiting went well but when the infant service was ignored by the incoming Conservative government, morale dropped and desertion became epidemic. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 170142)

The First World War

They remained so until June 1914 when the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to a British declaration of war against Germany on 4 August. At that time, when Britain went to war, so did her empire, and Canada thus became involved in a European struggle that broadened into a global conflict. The country's major contribution was an overseas military contingent, the Canadian Expeditionary Force, which in four years of bloody fighting on the western front acquired a reputation as one of the most professional combat formations on the Allied side.

Unfortunately the Royal Canadian Navy's wartime record was considerably less resplendent. On the day that Britain declared war, the Canadian government placed *Niobe* and *Rainbow* "at the disposal of His Majesty for general service in the Royal Navy."⁵ In the early days of the conflict, there was concern about the threat of German surface raiders and the two old cruisers engaged in coastal patrols although neither would have lasted long in combat with modern warships. To bolster naval defences on the west coast, the British Columbia government purchased two submarines built at Seattle and these were later commissioned into the RCN as *CC-1* and *CC-2*. While Canadians supplied the greater part of the crews for all four warships, most of the officers and specialists on board remained British. Both the RCN and its auxiliary component, the Royal Navy Canadian Volunteer Reserve, were active in recruiting for the British navy – some 1,700 Canadians joined the Overseas Division of the RNCVR and another 1,118 specialists, mainly pilots and medical officers, were obtained in Canada for the RN. Ironically, the first Canadians to die in combat during the war were four young RCN midshipmen who were lost when the British cruiser *HMS Good Hope* was sunk in action on 1 November 1914.

In addition to coastal patrols by its cruisers and submarines, the RCN also assisted the British *Naval Control Service*, which supervised merchant shipping in time of war, and participated in the

defence of Esquimalt and Halifax. This latter port was a major terminus for merchant ships sailing for Britain – and they soon sailed into dangerous waters. In 1914, German surface raiders had been viewed as the greatest menace but as the war progressed, it became apparent that the submarine was a more serious opponent. The RN had built up its pre-war battle fleet in expectation of fighting a major high seas action against its German counterpart and British naval planners had largely discounted submarines because their underwater speed was too slow to catch a warship. Nor were submarines regarded as that dangerous to merchant ships since, under the international laws of maritime war, a submarine had to surface and warn its target of an impending attack. This gave the threatened crew time not only to abandon their ship but also to send a radio message with their location – and, of course, that of the submarine.

It was all rather gentlemanly but things changed in 1915 when Germany declared the waters around the British Isles a “war zone” in which German U-boat* or submarine commanders would follow a “sink on sight” policy and attack targets without warning while submerged. At this time Germany possessed a small submarine force (29 boats, of which only 6 or 7 were operational at any one time) but it was deployed most effectively in the North Sea and English Channel. In May 1915, however, the torpedoing of the Cunard liner *Lusitania*, with the loss of many American lives, outraged the United States and caused German submarine operations in British waters to be abandoned in favour of the Mediterranean. The U-boats returned in February 1916 under complicated rules of engagement that forbade them to attack passenger liners and unarmed merchant ships outside the “war zone,” but the mistaken torpedoing of a small liner again caused them to be withdrawn in April 1916, although they were back in operation late in that year. By early 1917, with the war going against her, a desperate Germany decided to resort to unrestricted submarine warfare to knock Britain out of the war before, inevitably, the United States entered on the Allied side. On 1 February 1917 the German submarine force, which by this time had grown to 120 boats, was ordered to attack without warning.

This decision nearly won the war for Germany. Between February and April 1917, U-boats sank around 1,000 merchant ships displacing nearly two million gross tons in British waters – nearly a quarter of the shipping sailing from British ports. In the month of April alone, 881,000 tons of merchant shipping were lost and Britain was threatened with starvation. Despite these horrific statistics, the Royal Navy steadfastly refused to implement the convoy system, the most effective countermeasure against commerce raiders. The use of convoys would have deprived the U-boats of the independent ship targets that constituted most of their victories. In addition, convoys could be routed around dangerous areas and, if located by U-boats, the Germans would first have to deal with the naval escort.

In the end, it took the insistence of the British cabinet to force the Admiralty (the traditional term for the headquarters of the Royal Navy) to institute the convoy system in August 1917. The results were immediate – by October the rate of sinking of ships in convoy was 1 in 150, a rate of losses that could easily be overcome by new construction. Moreover, since the Royal Navy had broken the German naval cyphers, they were able to listen to their opponent’s radio traffic, learn where U-boats were to be deployed and steer convoys clear of them. Other measures were also taken. Increasing numbers of aircraft, the natural enemy of the submarine, were brought into service to fly patrols in British coastal waters. Scientists devised the hydrophone, a passive sonar* device, which could, under optimum conditions, detect the presence of a submarine, although it could not accurately locate it. If a submerged submarine was detected, naval escorts attempted to destroy it using another innovation – depth charges, containers filled with explosives dropped by a warship and set to explode at a pre-arranged depth. Since U-boats had to approach the convoys to find their prey, their chances of being sighted were correspondingly greater, and while Allied shipping losses declined in late 1917, U-boat losses increased. The German naval command began to look for less dangerous and more profitable areas in which to operate and the entry of the United States into the war drew their attention to the western side of the Atlantic.

U-boats In Canadian waters

The first indication that German submarines might operate in North American waters had actually occurred in November 1916 when *U-53* claimed five unescorted merchant ships off Nantucket. In the following summer, in response to a request from the Admiralty, the RCN created a local escort force to protect convoys assembling for passage to Britain and to guard coastal traffic. It was commanded by Captain Walter Hose, RCN, a former British officer who had transferred to Canadian service in 1911 and possessed considerable experience with small vessels. Hose proved to be an energetic and competent officer but he faced almost insurmountable problems building up an effective anti-submarine escort force. Its nucleus was 15 hastily-armed civilian vessels that had been carrying out coastal -patrols in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off Halifax since the beginning of war, and Hose made plans for Canada to man 36, later revised to 112, small escort vessels. A shortage of suitable craft and weapons, however, meant that the force was only completed with the loan of vessels from the British and American navies (some actually having been built in Canada), the hasty conversion of more civilian craft, and a massive programme of new construction. Personnel shortages were just as bad. Canadians serving in the Overseas Division of the RNCVR had to be called back to Canada to man Hose's force, and British and Newfoundland personnel procured on loan. Matters were not helped by the attitude of the Admiralty, which foisted incompetent British officers on both Hose and his superior in -Ottawa, Admiral Charles Kingsmill, and held discussions with the United States Navy about operations in Canadian waters without bothering to inform the RCN. It was fortunate for Hose and his sailors that the expected German submarine offensive did not materialize in 1917 because, at the end of that year, they had to deal with a worse catastrophe.

On the morning of 6 December 1917, the Norwegian steamer *Imo* collided with the French steamer *Mont Blanc* as the two ships were trying pass each other in the narrows that separate Bedford Basin from Halifax harbour proper. The result was one of the greatest disasters in Canadian history. The French vessel, which was carrying a deadly cargo of 2,300 tons of volatile picric acid, 200 tons of unstable TNT, 35 tons of highly inflammable benzene and – just for good measure – 10 tons of highly explosive gun cotton, caught fire. A boat's crew from HMCS *Niobe* boarded the *Mont Blanc* and was attempting to put out the fires when its lethal cargo detonated and the resulting blast, the largest man-made explosion before the atomic bomb, vaporized the *Niobe* party, flattened much of the city of Halifax, killed 2,500 people, injured some 9,000 and left 6,000 homeless in the depths of a Canadian winter. Naval personnel from American, British and Canadian warships in the harbour were prominent in the rescue activities, which lasted for weeks, but many Halifaxians blamed the disaster on the RCN, which was responsible for the control of traffic in the harbour, and it was certainly not the new service's best moment.

By the spring of 1918, Hose had managed to cobble together a force of 47 escort vessels, of which only a half dozen were capable of extended operations in all weathers, manned by 1,518 officers and men, many of them raw recruits. The only positive feature was the stationing of six United States Navy sub-chasers, fast modern craft, at Halifax and the promise of American assistance to create a Royal Canadian Naval Air Service to operate air patrols on the Atlantic coast.

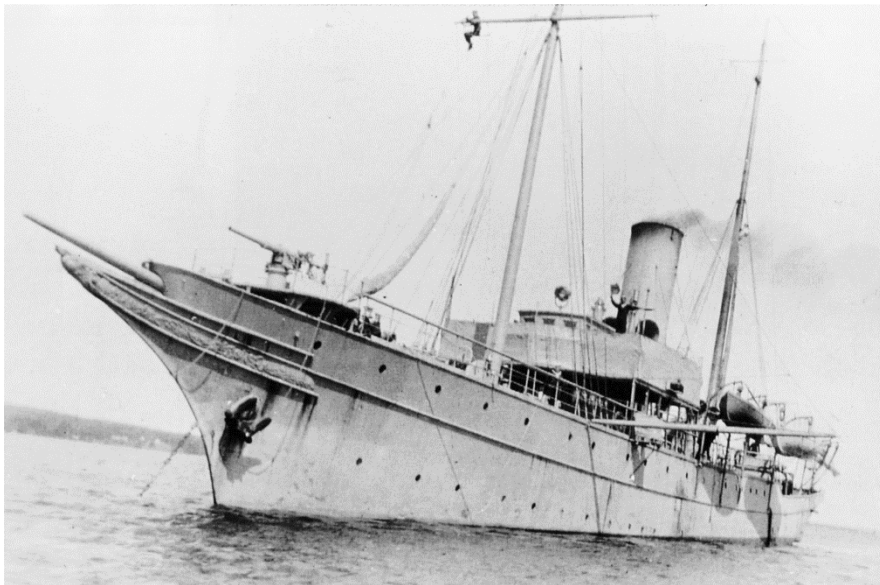
The "Hun Sea Wolf:" The cruise of U-156

The long expected U-boat offensive finally materialized in May 1918 when *U-151* sank 22 unescorted ships by gunfire off Maryland. Another submarine, *U-156*, laid mines off Massachusetts that sank the American cruiser USS *San Diego* before brazenly destroying several merchant ships by gunfire off Cape Cod in broad daylight and in plain view of idling vacationers. *U-156* then sailed north to Nova Scotian waters and her first Canadian victim, the lumber schooner *Dornfontein*, in the Bay of Fundy on 2 August. Moving east, the raider sank seven fishing schooners off the southern tip

of Nova Scotia after permitting their crews to take to their boats. These successes were capped by the torpedoing of the 5,000-ton tanker *Luz Blanca* just 35 miles from the mouth of Halifax harbour. When the crew of the tanker rowed ashore, their arrival created a sensation as newspapers outdid each other with headlines that proclaimed the peril of the “Hun Sea Wolf.” Many Canadians, both military and civilian, falsely believed that *U-156* was being guided by German agents on land and this, in turn, incited a witch-hunt for spies.

The newspapers criticized the RCN for not preventing these depredations. In fact most of Hose’s sailors were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing – providing local escort for a large troop convoy carrying 12,500 American and Canadian soldiers that had departed Halifax bound for Britain. Of the 40 seaworthy escort craft in Hose’s command when the *Luz Blanca* went down, one-third were unavailable because of mechanical problems or routine maintenance, and the remainder were involved in escort duties. The tanker’s sinking, however, had immediate repercussions – the terminus for trans-Atlantic convoys was switched from Halifax to Quebec City and the convoy system was imposed on Canadian coastal traffic, but these steps forced Hose to spread his already small force even thinner. More importantly, the USN rushed surface units to Canadian waters and sent flying boats to Halifax.

In the meantime, *U-156*, the source of all this commotion, had moved back into American waters where it sank two more victims, both unescorted merchantmen. Having caused trouble enough, *U-156* then headed for home but, unfortunately for the RCN, it chose to exit through Canadian waters.



Not a Proud Ship: HMCS Hochelaga in 1918

Built in the United States in 1900 as a pleasure yacht, **Hochelaga** was purchased by the RCN in 1914 to serve as a patrol vessel. Displacing 628 tons and armed with a single 12-pdr. gun, **Hochelaga** was the first Canadian warship to encounter a U-boat, **U-156** in August 1918, but the occasion was not a memorable one as her captain swiftly withdrew, which caused him to be cashiered. **Hochelaga** served in the RCN until 1920 and was then sold to private interests, only to reappear in the Mediterranean in 1948 when she was seized by the RN while engaged in transporting illegal immigrants to Palestine. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, CN 3400)

During a six-day period, 20-25 August 1918, it not only sank several fishing schooners off Cape Breton Island but also put a prize crew aboard the Canadian steam trawler *Triumph*, armed the vessel with weapons from the submarine, and used this miniature privateer to sink six other fishing craft. When the *Triumph*’s coal was exhausted, the prize crew scuttled her and re-boarded *U-156*.

The RCN finally caught up with the piratical *U-156* off the north-eastern tip of Nova Scotia in the early afternoon of 25 August 1918 when a patrol from Hose’s escort force consisting of the converted yachts *Cartier* and *Hochelaga* and trawlers 22 and 32 were steaming abreast about four miles apart in a patrol line. The senior officer was Lieutenant McGuirk of *Cartier* and the easternmost vessel, *Hochelaga*, armed with two 12-pdr. (3-inch) guns, was under the command of Lieutenant Robert Legate, RNCVR, a two-year veteran of the east coast patrols. Legate’s crew saw two fishing schooners and turned toward them, intending to warn their captains of the presence of a German submarine, but almost immediately one of the schooners seemed to disappear, and only then did Legate spot *U-156* surfaced near the remaining vessel. For the first time in the history of naval warfare a Canadian warship was in contact with a U-boat.

Unfortunately, instead of carrying out the tactical instructions that had been issued for such an occasion – that he should try to engage the submarine and inflict damage – Legate chose to steer in the opposite direction. As the *U-156* was armed with two 150mm (5.9-inch) deck guns which would have made short work of *Hochelaga*, this may have been wise but Legate compounded his sins when, after turning toward *Cartier* and signalling “enemy in sight” by flag (he had no radio), he refused to obey when McQuirk ordered his command to steer toward the *U-156*.⁶ Instead, Legate held back and cautioned his senior officer by megaphone not to engage until reinforcements arrived. The enemy had submerged by the time this conversation took place and the action, for all intents and purposes, had ended because, although some of McQuirk’s vessels were equipped with hydrophones, nobody had been trained to use them. *U-156* got clean away and sank another fishing schooner the next day while Legate went before a court martial which dismissed him from the service because he did not, “on sight of the enemy which it was his duty to engage, use his utmost exertion to bring his ship into action.”⁷ It was not an auspicious beginning for the Canadian navy’s involvement in anti-submarine warfare.

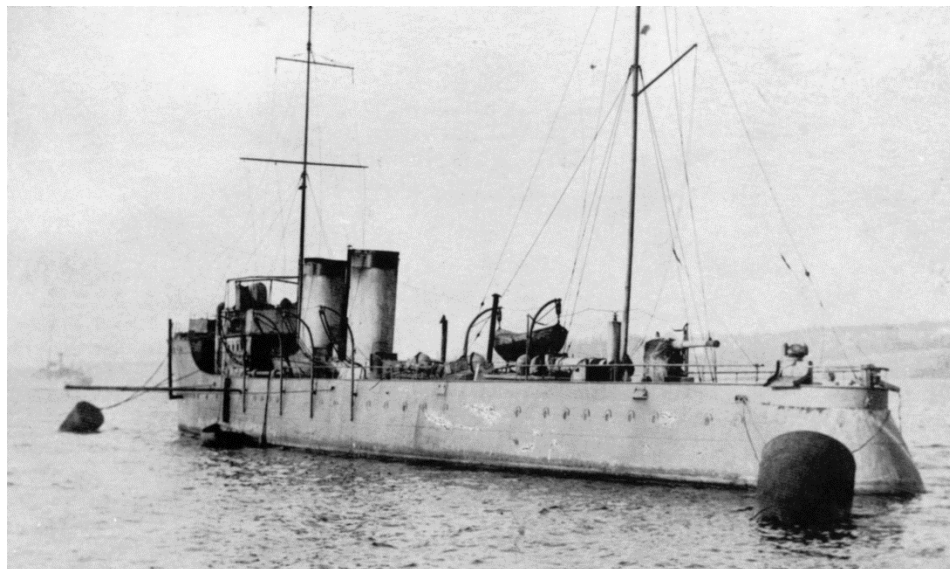
After creating havoc, *U-156* headed for Germany, only to be sunk by a mine in British waters with the loss of all hands. Its cruise was followed by those of *U-117* and *U-157* in September 1918 but these two boats did not enjoy the same success. Stymied by the strength of the naval escort accompanying the trans-Atlantic convoys, they managed to torpedo only two ocean-going merchantmen and several fishing vessels. An attempt by *U-157* to lay mines off the mouth of Halifax harbour was defeated by the constant presence of Allied naval units and no ships were lost as a result. Although the Canadian public and newspapers complained loudly that the RCN appeared to be incapable of safeguarding the nation’s coastline, what most observers overlooked was the fact that, during the period the three German submarines were in Canadian waters, more than 500 merchantmen left Halifax bound for the United Kingdom under escort and the U-boats were only attacking fishing craft and small vessels proceeding independently because better targets were lacking.

The scare, however, had been enough to move the government to action as it was expected that, despite recent victories on the Western Front, the war would continue into the following year. The Royal Canadian Naval Air Service was formed in September 1918, but when the Royal Naval Air Service refused to release experienced Canadian personnel, the new organization had to train flight personnel from scratch and this delayed it reaching operational status. By this time Hose commanded 120 small escort vessels (including the two submarines *CC-1* and *CC-2*, which had been brought from the west coast) for convoy and patrol work, as well as 50 auxiliary vessels for harbour defence and minor duties. Always a realist, Hose reported that his crews were “untrained, not only in the technical knowledge required to handle the weapons and offensive appliances on board the ships, but also in service discipline, being drafted to ships as hardly more than raw recruits.”⁸ He wanted the RCN to acquire destroyers, fast and relatively well-armed warships, which he saw as the most effective vessels for ASW (anti-submarine warfare), and the commander of the RCN, Admiral Kingsmill, advised the government to construct six destroyers in Canada as there was little hope of obtaining these useful ships from either Britain or the United States. The government did nothing.

The RCN’s record in the First World War

When the First World War ended in November 1918, the Canadian navy consisted of 5,500 officers and sailors in its three divisions: the regular RCN, the Royal Navy Canadian Volunteer Reserve and the Royal Canadian Naval Air Service. The seagoing organizations manned 170 small vessels but its largest purpose-built warships were the aged *Rainbow* (*Niobe* had been permanently secured alongside in 1916) and the submarines *CC-1* and *CC-2*. The remainder were a motley collection of converted civilian vessels and hastily-constructed small craft. Another 4,000 Canadians had served with the RN during the war, where they had established an enviable record, particularly in the Royal Naval Air Service. Yet, the RCN’s greatest

contribution to the Allied naval effort had been Hose's ragged little -armada. Although its single action against the enemy (*Hochelaga* versus *U-156* on 25 August 1918) was not very noteworthy, it had rendered essential service by protecting Canada's east coast ports and covering the first stages of the trans-Atlantic convoys to Britain. The point should be made that no merchant ship escorted by the RCN was lost to a U-boat during the First World War.



Rag Tag Fleet -- HMCS Grilse, 1918

During the First World War, Canada's naval force was largely assembled from hastily-converted civilian vessels and purpose-built small naval craft. One of the more powerful ASW vessels in this rag-tag fleet was HMCS *Grilse*, a former American yacht. Displacing 287 tons, manned by a crew of 56 and armed with two 12-pdr. guns and one 14-inch torpedo tube, *Grilse* was capable of 30 knots, making her useful for patrol duties. Sold to a member of the Guggenheim family and reconverted to a yacht, she foundered in a storm off Long Island in 1938. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA-133293)

defence but approximately 3,300 warships and nearly 600 aircraft had been deployed in anti-submarine operations. Third, and perhaps most important, the U-boats had been the only German naval units to attack shipping in Canadian waters. Two decades later these three lessons would have to be learned again – at an awful cost.

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Unfortunately, Canadians and their politicians neither knew much, nor really cared much, about their tiny navy. In their eyes, the nation's major contribution to Allied victory had been its army – more than 600,000 -Canadian men, about one in three of military age, had joined it – and throughout the war Canada's attention had been firmly fixed on the activities of its fighting units on the Western Front. Canadians were proud of their soldiers' victories, sorrowful at the cost (232,494 dead and wounded) and determined that this sacrifice, which guaranteed the nation a separate signature on the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919, would never be forgotten. Balanced against this achievement, the wartime efforts of Canada's infant navy were regarded as useful but insignificant.

What Canadians and their leaders were overlooking were three crucial lessons of the naval war of 1914-1918. First, submarines were the only German forces to significantly threaten Allied control of the sea lanes – the best estimate is that a total of 351 U-boats sank 5,000 warships and merchant vessels displacing about 12 million tons during the First World War. Second, it had required a tremendous effort to defeat the German submarine force – the convoy was the most effective