

Remembrance Series

# The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence



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## **The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence**

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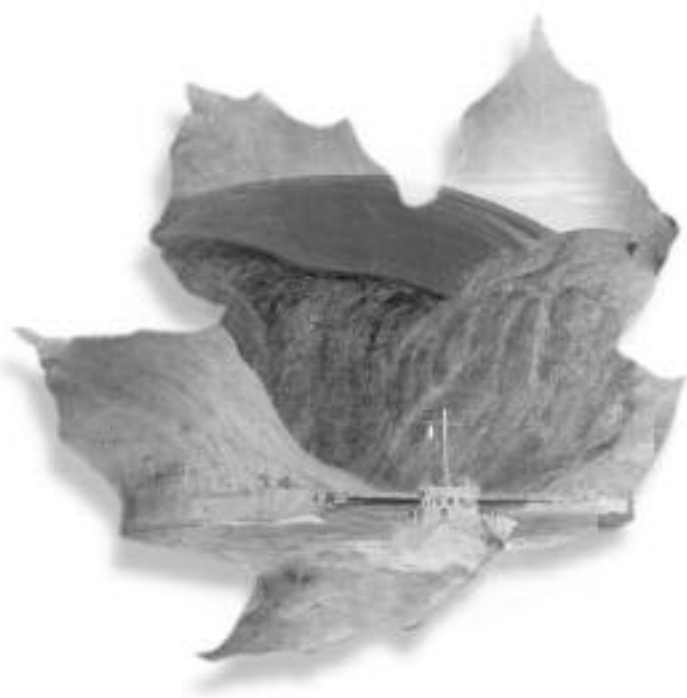
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# The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence



## **THE BATTLE OF THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE**

Generations of Canadians have served our country and the world during times of war, military conflict and peace. Through their courage and sacrifice, these men and women have helped to ensure that we live in freedom and peace, while also fostering freedom and peace around the world. The Canada Remembers Program promotes a greater understanding of these Canadians' efforts and honours the sacrifices and achievements of those who have served and those who supported our country on the home front.

The program engages Canadians through the following elements: national and international ceremonies and events including Veterans' Week activities, youth learning opportunities, educational and public information materials (including on-line learning), the maintenance of international and national Government of Canada memorials and cemeteries (including 13 First World War battlefield memorials in France and Belgium), and the provision of funeral and burial services.

Canada's involvement in the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, and Canada's efforts during military operations and peace efforts has always been fuelled by a commitment to protect the rights of others and to foster peace and freedom. Many Canadians have died for these beliefs, and many others have dedicated their lives to these pursuits. This willingness to stand up to protect human rights, freedom and justice remains one of Canada's defining characteristics in the eyes of the world.

Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn more about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who served our country, and to help preserve their legacy by passing the torch of remembrance to future generations of Canadians.

*...To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch, be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

**From "In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which saw German U-boats penetrate the Cabot Strait and the Strait of Belle Isle to sink 23 ships between 1942 and 1944, marked the only time since the War of 1812 that enemy warships inflicted death within Canada's inland waters. The battle advanced to within 300 kilometres of Québec City. A war that pervaded people's lives but was still somehow remote, had become

immediate, threatening, and very real. The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence was part of a larger conflict called The Battle of the Atlantic which included all of the Atlantic Ocean between North America and Europe, and was fought between 1939 and 1945.



HALIFAX HERALD, MAY 13, 1942.  
(LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA (LAC) N112595)

The U-boats' disruption of river traffic was serious, because the greatest volume of shipping passed through ports on the St. Lawrence. Although Halifax and Sydney were crucial marshaling areas for overseas convoys, in 1939 Montreal exported more tons of shipping than all other Canadian east coast ports combined. Even by 1941 the ports of Montreal, Trois-Rivières and Quebec City still accounted for more tonnage than half of the shipments from the Canadian east coast. Furthermore, the sailing time from Montreal to Liverpool, the major convoy arrival point in Britain, was shorter than that for a ship sailing from New York to Liverpool. Any activity that hampered St. Lawrence River



ON SEPTEMBER 11, 1942, HMCS CHARLOTTETOWN (I) WAS DESTROYED WITHIN SIGHT OF HORRIFIED ONLOOKERS ON THE SHORES NEAR CAP-CHAT. (DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE (DND), CN-3636)

shipping, with its excellent access to Canada's industrial heartland, was a serious threat.



VICTORY BOND ADVERTISEMENT IN THE MONTREAL DAILY STAR, NOVEMBER 2, 1942. (LAC N12595)

Between 1942 and 1944, German U-boats posed this very threat. The moderate but continual toll they exacted on shipping and lives was itself of great concern. Their ability to close the Gulf of St. Lawrence to international traffic, resulting in a 25-percent decrease in associated cargo movements, was of potentially greater significance. Allied plans for the invasion of Europe

depended upon the safe arrival of merchant shipping and its precious cargo in Britain.

Those who fought this battle and those who gave their lives in the Gulf of St. Lawrence were engaged in a struggle that would have wide implications.

## **THE GASPÉ BASE**

The possibility of enemy attacks on shipping in the Gulf of St. Lawrence had been anticipated. In early 1940, naval planners gave significant thought to the problem. Initially, their plans focussed on establishing a modest naval base at Gaspé, Quebec. They felt that a station equipped with four or five armed yachts could address the need for local convoy escorts.

They drastically revised their plans, however, during the summer of 1940. One after another, European powers had been falling before the Nazi juggernaut. There was a real fear that Britain would be invaded. War leaders examined Canada's east coast, searching for a refuge for the mighty Royal Navy should it be forced to withdraw from bases in the United Kingdom. The town of Gaspé, with its generous sheltered harbour, was considered a leading possibility. Within weeks Gaspé was slated to become one of the east coast's three leading naval ports, alongside those already established at Sydney and Halifax in Nova Scotia.

While fear that Britain would be invaded waned during 1941, the need to prepare for anti-submarine defences in the Gulf of St. Lawrence was not discounted, and work on the Gaspé base progressed. In March 1942, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King highlighted concerns about an impending U-boat offensive in the Gulf during a speech in the House of Commons:

*Officers of the Canadian naval service have expressed the view that within a few months submarines may well be found operating within the gulf, and even in the St. Lawrence River. It is known that enemy submarines can leave their bases on the European continent, voyage to the shores of this continent, seek their prey for some days or weeks and return to their bases without the necessity of refuelling. If enemy submarines do operate in the gulf and river St. Lawrence, an additional burden will be thrown on the*



THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE BY THESE CURTISS KITTYHAWK FIGHTERS AT MONT-JOLI, QUÉBEC, TO THE TORPEDOING OF A SHIP RESULTED IN THE LOSS OF ONE AIRCRAFT AND ITS PILOT, SQUADRON LEADER J.A.J. CHEVRIER. (DND, PMR 75-622)

*Canadian navy. Not only will our navy have the duty of assisting in escorting Atlantic convoys, but it will also have to assume the task of escorting convoys in the river St. Lawrence and in the gulf as well as along our coasts.<sup>1</sup>*

On May 1, 1942, the new Gaspé naval base, HMCS *Fort Ramsay*, was officially opened. It featured seaward defences, fuel tanks, jetties, magazines, maintenance shops, a marine railway, communications facilities, accommodations and a hangar and apron for flying boats. The spacious Gaspé harbour contained only one ship however—the 18-metre guard vessel *Venning*. Within days, the need for these facilities and for a greatly enhanced warship presence in the Gulf became crystal clear.

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1. *House of Commons, Debates, March 25, 1942, p. 1630.*



## SUBMARINE OFFENSIVE MOVES TO CANADA'S EAST COAST

One week after *Fort Ramsay* was commissioned, Karl Thurmann, captain of *U-553*, piloted his U-boat into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. He had been assigned to *Operation Drumbeat*, Germany's strategic submarine offensive against North America's eastern seaboard. Since its start in January 1942, the offensive had scored 48 victories against ships in Canadian east coast waters. Now, a new phase began as the battle thrust westward towards Canada's heartland.



FLYING OFFICER M.J. BÉLANGER (RIGHT) AND HIS CREW MADE THREE NEAR-MISS ATTACKS ON *U-517* IN THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE. (DND, PMR 77-178)

On the night of May 11, Thurmann sighted the *Nicoya*, a British freighter carrying war supplies, sailing outbound from Montreal. He torpedoed it 15 kilometres north of Pointe-à-la-Frégate. Before morning light, he also sank the *Leto*, a Dutch



WHEN THE *CHATHAM* WAS SUNK ON AUGUST 27, 1942, OF THE 562 PASSENGERS AND CREW MEMBERS, ALL BUT 13 WERE SAVED BY THE CREW OF THE HMCS *TRAIL*, RCAF AIRCRAFT AND US COAST GUARD ESCORTS. (LAC, PA-200329)



(LAC, PA-200321)



SURVIVORS OF *CHATHAM*, THE FIRST AMERICAN TROOP TRANSPORT TO BE LOST DURING THE WAR, BEING RESCUED BY THE CREW OF *HMCS TRAIL* IN THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE ON AUGUST 27, 1942. (LAC, PA-200331)

freighter chartered to the British Ministry of War Transport, off Rivière-la-Madeleine. Six merchant seaman died in the first attack and a dozen in the second.

The next day, amidst media accounts of survivors' lifeboats drifting ashore in the Gaspé region, Naval Service Headquarters announced that:

*...the first enemy attack upon shipping in the St. Lawrence River took place on 11 May, when a freighter was sunk. Forty-one survivors have been landed from this vessel. The situation regarding shipping in the river is being closely watched, and long prepared plans for its special protection... are in operation. Any possible future sinkings in this area will not be made public, in order that information of value to the enemy may be withheld from him.<sup>2</sup>*

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2. David Robinson, "71 warships earn Gulf of St. Lawrence Distinction", *Maritime Command Trident*, June 5, 1997.

This development led to a major reinforcement of the Gaspé site and the creation of the “Gulf Escort Force” with its two corvettes, five Bangor Class minesweepers, three Fairmile motor launches, and one armed yacht. This force assumed primary responsibility for escorting Québec–Sydney convoys. Along with the Sydney Force, consisting of two Bangor minesweepers, six Fairmile launches and two armed yachts, they constituted the leading naval forces available for Gulf services.

On the night of May 8, 1942, Eastern Air Command picked up a false report of a U-boat sighting from Cape Ray, Newfoundland, and commenced anti-submarine patrols over the Gulf on May 11, 1942. Before sunset, it received word of the sinking of the *Nicoya*. Air reinforcements were hastily dispatched to a training airfield at Mont-Joli, Quebec. Eventually, 117 (Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron, equipped with Canso and Catalina aircraft, was sent to North Sydney, Nova Scotia. Although at half-strength already, 117 Squadron also formed a detachment at Gaspé. Thirteen other squadrons of the Royal Canadian Air Force would eventually join the fray, notable among them 113 (Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Its Hudson aircraft would be credited with the overwhelming majority of airborne anti-submarine attacks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence by the end of 1944.

During the remainder of the ice-free season, the Canadian Navy’s modest inland escort force and its air counterparts fought against a canny and highly successful foe that operated with daunting success.

In July 1942, Ernst Vogelsang piloted *U-132* into the Gulf. On July 6, within half an hour, he sank three ships from the twelve-ship convoy QS-15: the British registered *Dinaric* and

*Hainaut* and the Greek vessel *Anastassios Pateras*. Eventually depth charge runs by HMCS *Drummondville*, commanded by Lieutenant J.P. Fraser, drove the submarine to the bottom, where it hid for 12 hours. Four Curtiss Kittyhawk fighters from 130 Squadron in Mont-Joli, lead by Squadron Leader J.A.J. Chevrier, scrambled to join the attack. Chevrier's aircraft disappeared during the mission, never to be found.

On July 20, Vogelsang added to his tally. He torpedoed the British merchant ship *Frederika Lensen* west of Pointe-à-la-Frégate, killing 10 merchant sailors.

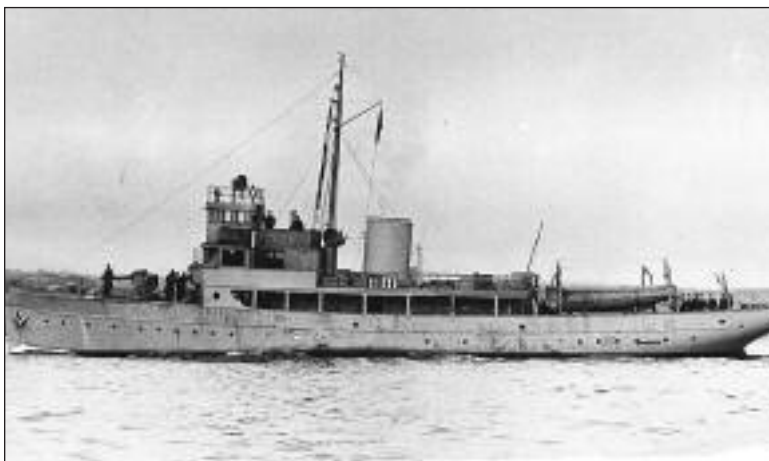
## **U-BOAT ACTIONS**

During late August, the commander of Germany's submarine forces, Admiral Karl Dönitz, deployed three U-boats off the Strait of Belle Isle where they could attack convoys that supported the construction of new American air base facilities at Goose Bay, Labrador, or convoys that were bound from Sydney to Greenland. Thus began the tag-team blitz of Paul Hartwig's *U-517* and Eberhard Hoffman's *U-165*, which would inflict the greatest shipping losses of the Gulf of St. Lawrence campaign.

On August 27, the pair launched their assault with a daylight attack on LN-6, a small Quebec-Goose Bay convoy, and SG-6, an American-escorted convoy bound from Sydney to Greenland. Just as the two convoys entered the Strait of Belle Isle, Hartwig torpedoed the US Army troop transport *Chatham*, which was carrying 562 passengers. The transport would become the first American troop ship lost during the Second World War. Lieutenant G.S. Hall, commanding the nearby convoy LN-6 escort HMCS *Trail*, broke away and joined the rescue effort that followed, helping to pluck sodden, oil-covered survivors from the icy waters.

Only 13 people on the *Chatham* perished thanks to these courageous efforts and those of the US Coast Guard ships escorting convoy SG-6.

The next day the U-boat duo struck at SG-6 again. *U-165* torpedoed the merchant ship *Laramie*, while *U-517* attacked the US-registered *Arlyn*. The *Laramie* survived to limp back to Sydney, Nova Scotia, but *Arlyn* and nine of her crew found their last resting places deep in the Strait of Belle Isle.



THE ARMED YACHT HMCS *RACCOON* (BEAM VIEW) WAS SUNK DURING THE NIGHT OF SEPTEMBER 6-7, 1942. WEEKS LATER A FEW BITS OF WRECKAGE WASHED UP ON SHORE. (DND, 2784)

Hartwig's next victim was the first Canadian merchant vessel to fall prey during the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The *Donald Stewart*, a bulk "canaller"—so called because it was small enough to navigate the pre-St. Lawrence Seaway lock system—was owned by Canada Steamship Lines of Montreal and was sailing for Labrador laden with aviation gas and bulk cement to be used by the US Air Force for runways under construction at Goose Bay. At 1:30 a.m. on September 3, Hartwig's war shot ripped through the canaller's hull just

forward of the engine room, turning the ship into a floating inferno and killing three. Lieutenant Tom Golby, commanding HMCS *Weyburn*, spotted the U-boat and went full ahead, hoping to ram it. Then he fired with the corvette's 4-inch gun, and finally dropped a couple of depth charges as the submarine dived. Hartwig managed to escape his attackers, in large measure because of problems with the corvette's asdic (sonar) system.

The loss of the *Donald Stewart* set back vital construction at Goose Bay for months.

Hours after *Weyburn's* action, a Digby aircraft, piloted by Flying Officer J.H. Sanderson of 10 Squadron (Gander), made the Royal Canadian Air Force's first attack on a U-boat in the Gulf theatre. Sanderson swooped down to launch an attack on *U-517* from only 45 metres above the surface of the water. Unfortunately, his depth charges went off prematurely, doing more harm to his aircraft than to the submarine.

## **SEARCH FOR DEADLY SUBMARINES**

Now the Royal Canadian Air Force threw all it could into the search for the deadly submarines. It rushed further bombers to Mont-Joli. Knowing that the very presence of air cover could deter the U-boats, the RCAF's Eastern Air Command even ordered aircraft from the Operational Training Units in Greenwood and Debert, Nova Scotia, and from the General Reconnaissance Schools in Summerside and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, into the air. Improved air cover could do little, however, if weather conspired against the defenders. And that is what happened with convoy QS-33. It was enveloped by fog between Cap-Chat and Gaspé and emerged the worst-mauled convoy of the Gulf contest.

Ironically, heavy air cover elsewhere drove the U-boats further up the Gulf, west of Pointe-des-Monts, where the St. Lawrence narrows to 50 kilometres in width. There, they intercepted eight merchant ships, escorted by the corvette HMCS *Arrowhead*, the minesweeper HMCS *Truro*, the armed yacht HMCS *Raccoon* and two Fairmile launches. The convoy was off Cap-Chat shortly after 10 p.m. on September 6, 1942, when *U-165* sank the Greek merchant ship *Aeas* with a torpedo, killing two. The *Arrowhead*, the lead escort, turned back and through the glow of starshell, its captain, Commander E.G. Skinner, saw the *Raccoon* zig-zagging in search of the submarine. That was the last time anyone saw the little warship — a torpedo caused her boiler to explode and she sank in minutes.

A few days earlier near Matane, the *Raccoon* had seen two torpedoes cross its bows at perilously close range, but had escaped unscathed. Now, its luck ran out. At 1:12 a.m. on September 7, as the convoy passed Rivière-la-Madeleine, two loud explosions rent the night. Ships in company guessed they were hearing depth charges dropped by the *Raccoon* as it continued to pursue *U-165*. Only later was it discovered that the sounds were those of a German torpedo ripping through the converted yacht.

HMCS *Raccoon* and its entire crew of 37 were lost in an instant. One of those who perished was Supply Assistant John Sheflin. As his ship went down, a train sped through nearby Rivière-la-Madeleine carrying his wife Marguerite and two pre-school children. They had made a spur-of-the moment decision to move from Toronto to join family in Eureka, Nova Scotia, so that they could see Sheflin when he took his occasional shore leaves. It would be years before his family



discovered just how close together they were, before tragedy tore them apart forever.

The next day, *U-517* attacked the diminished convoy. Hartwig lay in wait just off Cap-Gaspé, as his prey slowly advanced towards him through fog and mist. Within short order, he sent three more merchant ships to the bottom. The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence claimed the Greek registered ships *Mount Pindus* and *Mount Taygetus*. Two seamen perished in the first and five in the second. The *Oakton*, owned by the



FAIRMILES OF THE 82<sup>ND</sup> FLOTILLA STOP OFF AT GASPÉ AFTER BUFFETING WINTER STORMS ON THE WAY DOWN THE ST. LAWRENCE TO HALIFAX. (LAC, PA-134348)

Gulf and Lake Navigation Company of Montreal, was Hartwig's next target. His torpedo struck its engine room, killing an oiler and two firemen, then sending a cargo of coal destined for Corner Brook, Newfoundland, to the bottom. Lieutenant Bill Grant in *Fairmile 083* rescued 17 survivors from the *Oakton*, along with 61 sailors from the two Greek vessels.

## **Closing the Gulf of St. Lawrence**

Faced with a rising toll on lives and shipping, the Canadian government closed the St. Lawrence to all trans-Atlantic shipping on September 9, 1942, and limited coastal convoys to essential levels. This still left considerable work for the defenders, as 40 per cent of traffic on the Sydney-Quebec corridor supported economically vital coastal shipping. Their task was made all the more difficult by a controversial naval decision to divert 17 desperately-needed corvettes to *Operation Torch*, the impending invasion of North Africa.

Eastern Air Command positioned itself to better defend the remaining convoys by establishing a “Special Submarine Hunting Detachment” of 113 Squadron in Chatham, New Brunswick. They made their first U-boat attack on September 9, when Pilot Officer R.S. Keetley dove on *U-165*, about 32 kilometres south of Anticosti Island. He did not do much damage to the submarine, but subsequent naval and air activity in the area frustrated the U-boat’s efforts to attack other convoys.

Still, the losses mounted. HMCS *Charlottetown*, which had successfully escorted 11 Quebec–Sydney convoys, fell victim to *U-517* on September 11. Taking place in broad daylight, the attack horrified onlookers, who saw the debacle from shore. The ship sank within four minutes. Only one sailor was killed as a direct result of the exploding torpedoes, but nine other seamen would perish from injuries sustained in the water when the *Charlottetown*’s depth-charges and ammunition detonated as it was sinking to the bottom. Those lost included the captain, Lieutenant-Commander John Bonner. Crew member Tommy MacDonald was wounded in the explosions but he tried to retrieve a float for

his shipmates. His actions put too much of a strain on his wounds and he died later in Gaspé. Also lost was seaman John “Judy” Garland. After having ensured that most crew members had life jackets, Garland went below to rescue the ship’s mascot, Screech, a dog to which he was devoted. Garland perished in the attempt. Tragically, the dog was already in the water and needed no assistance. Screech was presented to Garland’s mother by surviving members of the crew a few weeks later.

Hartwig’s submarine would end its reign of terror in the St. Lawrence on September 15 with an attack on the 21-ship convoy, SQ-36, adding the *Saturnus* and *Inger Elisabeth* to his deadly tally. Despite counter-attacks by a heavy escort that included the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Salisbury*, five other warships, and good air cover, *U-517* only sustained minor damage. Before the convoy reached its destination, Hoffman’s *U-165* would send the merchantman *Joannis* to the bottom too.

Now, Hartwig was transformed from hunter to hunted, as he endured a series of attacks by warships, and by pilots from 113 Squadron, who were employing new, more effective anti-submarine tactics. On September 16, Pilot Officer Keetley bracketed *U-517* with four depth charges, but failed to sink the U-boat. At one point, a depth-charge was caught on the deck of *U-517*. It was unfastened and thrown overboard. Had the U-boat descended deep enough, the depth-charge would have destroyed it. HMCS *Georgian* discovered the submarine positioning itself to attack convoy SQ-38 off Gaspé on September 21, and relentlessly pursued the marauder for two hours with depth charge attacks. Finally, the *Georgian* crew saw the U-boat surface, roll, and sink again. It looked like Hartwig had finally met his end, but he survived, laying low for two days while he repaired damages.

Then, it was the air force's turn to stalk the submarine ace again.

Within 24 hours of September 24, crews from 113 Squadron registered seven sightings and three attacks on *U-517*. Flying Officer M.J. Bélanger, an experienced 23-year old Québec native who came to the squadron from duty as a flying instructor, made two of the attacks. Neither sank the U-boat. Aircraft continued to harry the submarine as it cruised the Gulf.

Bélanger was in the cockpit for another attack on *U-517* on September 29. Although his depth charges exploded all around the submarine's hull, it survived yet again. Still, Bélanger's attacks had badly hurt the submarine. Later the young airman would be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, in large part for his determined attack of Hartwig's U-boat.

As *U-517* and *U-165* left the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Admiral Dönitz sent five more submarines to take their places. These found air defences intimidating, and the convoys much better defended. Nevertheless, *U-69* was able to creep up the St. Lawrence River to within 300 kilometres of Quebec City. There, off Métis Beach, it sank the Canadian freighter *Carolus*, taking 11 lives. One of those killed was 16-year old John Milmine of Verdun, Québec, a galley boy sailing in his first ship. More fortunate was Robert Dowson, RCNVR, also of Verdun, who was among the 19 crew members rescued. Dowson, senior of three gunners on the *Carolus*, was one of about 1,600 members of the Royal Canadian Navy who, along with members of the Royal Artillery Marine Regiment, volunteered to serve in Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) during the war.

*U-106* slipped through Cabot Strait and also reported unpromising conditions. Despite that, when convoy BS-31



THE CORVETTE HMCS *SHAWINIGAN*, A VETERAN OF THE ST. LAWRENCE CONVOY BATTLES. (DND, WO-30-126)

from Corner Brook, Newfoundland, crossed its path, *U-106* sent the Bowood pulp carrier *Waterton* to the bottom. It was one of five ships lost to enemy action by the Newfoundland paper company during the war. Luckily *Waterton's* crew all survived the ordeal. Counterattacks by the armed yacht HMCS *Vison* and aircraft from 117 (Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron drove the submarine below the surface, where it remained at great depth for eight hours. Her veteran commander, Herman Rasch, declared that anti-submarine conditions in the area were “exactly like those in the [Bay of] Biscay” off France, where Allied forces were engaged in an all-out offensive against the German submarines. Rasch would leave the Gulf after three weeks, denied further victories.

## **The Heaviest Blow of All**

The last loss of the 1942 season was the largest, and perhaps the most tragic. It was the Sydney to Port aux Basques ferry *Caribou*, which was sunk by *U-69* in Cabot Strait during the early morning hours of October 14, 1942. As the U-boat's

torpedoes struck home, the ferry's lone escort, HMCS *Grandmère* rushed in to ram the attacker, and then dropped a pattern of six depth charges when the submarine crash dived. The submarine would remain submerged while the ferry's passengers fought for their lives above.

For 90 minutes, the *Grandmère's* captain, Lieutenant James Cuthbert, attempted to find and destroy the submarine in accordance with naval orders, all the while tortured by the knowledge that he could be plucking *Caribou* survivors from the sea instead. Finally, he joined the concerted air-sea rescue effort. Later he would recollect the painful decisions he and those in similar situations had made:

*God. I felt the full complement of things you feel at a time like that. Things you had to live with. You are torn. Demoralized. Terribly alone .... I should have gone on looking for the submarine, but I couldn't. Not with women and children out there somewhere. I couldn't do it any more than I could have dropped depth charges among them.*<sup>3</sup>

That night the ferry's complement included 237 crew and passengers: 46 crew members from the Newfoundland Merchant Navy, 73 civilians and 118 Canadian, British and American military personnel. Only 101 survived the disaster. Of the crew, 31 perished, including the Master, Ben Taverner, and his two sons Harold and Stanley, both serving as First Officers. The crew losses also included five other pairs of brothers and Bride Fitzpatrick, the only female member of the Newfoundland Merchant Navy known to have lost her life to

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3. Roger Sarty, *Canada and the Battle of the Atlantic*, Montréal: Art Global, 1998, p. 114.

enemy action during the Second World War. The civilian death toll included at least five mothers and 10 children. Many of the military passengers were Newfoundlanders in the Royal Navy or the Canadians in uniform who were travelling home on leave. Two were Nursing Sisters of the Royal Canadian Navy: Agnes Wilkie became the only Canadian Nursing Sister to die due to enemy action during the war; the other, her good friend and travelling companion, Margaret Brooke, was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire for her gallant efforts to save Wilkie as they drifted through the night on a life raft.

More than any other event, the loss of the *Caribou* revealed to all Canadians our vulnerability to seaward attack and brought home the fact that the war was not just a European show. Thankfully, while Canadians and Newfoundlanders mourned their losses, Admiral Dönitz was pulling his submarines out of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. His last five U-boats in the theatre had encountered too much opposition and had sunk only five ships. Donitz believed that such results could not justify a continued presence in Canada's inland waters.

It had been a tragic season, with 21 ships sunk and many others damaged. Aircraft were lost. Nearly 300 people perished. Valuable cargoes were destroyed. Access to the port of Montréal, arguably the best equipped in Canada, was dramatically curtailed. Military authorities, aware of the limited resources they had been able to muster for the defence of the St. Lawrence theatre, privately chastised themselves and vowed to do better the next year.

Still, a victory of sorts had been won. Ever-improving defences had deterred the U-boats, although it would take a post-war

examination of German war records to confirm how seriously. But even at the time the news was not all bad. In determining the success or failure of convoy operations, the critical measure was merchant cargoes safely delivered.

The Honourable Angus MacDonald, Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, touched on this subject in his address to the House of Commons on March 17, 1943:

*The honourable member for Gaspé .... said that the battle of the St. Lawrence gulf was lost .... I say that the battle of the St. Lawrence gulf has not been lost. I am not going to give the exact figures, which would perhaps help the enemy, but I can say that of the total tonnage which used that river and the gulf last year only three out of every thousand tons was sunk. That is a fairly good record. I know the general average of convoy sinkings throughout the world, and I can say that if you lose only three tons out of every thousand you have at sea you are doing pretty well, in fact somewhat better than average.<sup>4</sup>*

## **THE LAST MAJOR ENCOUNTERS**

During 1943 the U-boats waged their war of terror in other waters, except for two forays intended to help German prisoners of war escape from Canada. In September, *U-536* entered the Bay of Chaleur to pick up escapees from a prisoner of war camp in Bowmanville, Ontario. Canadian naval authorities knew what was planned and assigned a destroyer, three corvettes, and five Bangor minesweepers to close the area and hunt the submarine down. As it turned out, the only prisoner of war to escape Bowmanville was arrested before making his rendezvous. *U-536* was attacked, but managed to escape the dragnet.

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4. *House of Commons, Debates, March 17, 1943, p. 1344.*



In 1944, however, the U-boats returned to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which had been re-opened to trans-Atlantic vessels, intent on repeating their successes of 1942. By this time the Royal Canadian Navy was more adept at anti-submarine warfare, and its convoy procedures were much improved. Maritime air patrols were more proficient too. The U-boats returned with a potentially deadly advantage, however, the newly invented schnorkel mast, which allowed a submarine to recharge its batteries while submerged. The device significantly lessened the amount of time a U-boat had to spend on the surface, decreasing its vulnerability to attack.

While schnorkel-equipped U-boats mounted a number of attacks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence during 1944, they had very limited success. HMCS *Magog* took one of *U-1223*'s Gnat torpedoes (weapons that homed in on the noise a ship made) in its stern in the vicinity of the Pointe-des-Monts lighthouse on October 14. Excellent damage control allowed its crew to keep the ship afloat until it was towed to Quebec City, but the vessel was declared an effective total loss on arrival. On November 2, *U-1223* struck again. It torpedoed and badly damaged the grain carrier *Fort Thompson* near Matane, Quebec.

The last major encounter of the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence came in late November, in the Cabot Strait. It would claim the corvette HMCS *Shawinigan*, a veteran of the St. Lawrence convoy battles of 1942 and the search for *U-536* in 1943.

*Shawinigan* and the US Coast Guard cutter *Sassafras* were ordered to escort the Sydney to Port aux Basques ferry *Burgeo*. Since the loss of the *Caribou*, that ferry was always escorted. The three ships made an uneventful crossing to Port aux Basques on November 24, at which time *Shawinigan*

detached to continue anti-submarine patrols in the area. It was scheduled to rendezvous with the *Burgeo* the following morning for the return to Cape Breton. But the corvette never made it.

Nearby, *U-1228*, which had been ordered into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, was trying to repair a faulty schnorkel. Without the tactical advantage that the device provided, its commander, Frederick-Wilhelm Marienfeld, feared his chances should he pass through the Cabot Strait. On the moonlit night of November 24, he tested his repairs, found them ineffective and decided to return to Germany. As he issued orders that would pilot his command back into the Atlantic, *Shawinigan* appeared. *U-1228*, which had not yet recorded an attack on enemy shipping, let loose a Gnat torpedo. Exactly four minutes later, HMCS *Shawinigan* disappeared in a plume of water and a shower of sparks. All 91 members of her crew were killed. It was the Royal Canadian Navy's greatest loss of life during the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Soon after the tragedy, winter ice returned to the Gulf and the U-boats departed, never to return.

## **COMMEMORATION**

Those who fought in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence achieved and sacrificed much in their efforts to help maintain peace and freedom in Canada. These combatants were among the more than one million men and women who served in Canada's armed forces during the Second World War. More than 42,000 Canadians gave their lives in the war. Canada recognizes the sacrifices and achievements of all the Canadians, like those who fought in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, who accomplished so much and left such a lasting legacy of peace.



**GOVERNOR GENERAL ADRIENNE CLARKSON (LEFT) AND GEORGE BAKER, THE MINISTER OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (RIGHT), DISPLAY THE NEW GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE COMMEMORATIVE DISTINCTION PENNANT DURING CEREMONIES IN THE SENATE CHAMBER. (NOVEMBER 1999)**

Many of those whose lives were claimed by the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence have no known grave. Their lives, and their sacrifices, are commemorated on Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorials on both sides of the Atlantic. Those members of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army and the Canadian and Newfoundland Merchant Marine whose grave is the sea, are commemorated on the Halifax Memorial. Members of the Royal Canadian Air Force who lost their lives in the Gulf theatre and whose last resting place is unknown, are commemorated on the Commonwealth Air Forces Ottawa Memorial. The names of Royal Navy personnel whose lives were claimed by the waters of the Gulf, are inscribed on the Plymouth Naval Memorial or the Lowestoft Naval Memorial in the United Kingdom.

Twelve squadrons of the Royal Canadian Air Force were awarded the battle honour North West Atlantic, in recognition of their contribution to Eastern Air Command's defence of the

Gulf of St. Lawrence. Initially, no parallel honour existed with which to recognize the Royal Canadian Navy's convoy escort and antisubmarine operations in that theatre. This oversight was remedied in 1992, when Governor General Ramon Hnatyshyn approved the uniquely Canadian battle honour Gulf of St. Lawrence. It has since been awarded to 129 Canadian warships that played a part in defending our inland waters against the U-boats.

Today, the battle honour is displayed with pride by Her Majesty's Canadian Ships *Brandon*, *Charlottetown*, *Nanaimo*, *Shawinigan*, *Summerside*, *Toronto* and *Ville de Québec*. On November 4, 1999, during ceremonies commemorating the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson approved a new Gulf of St. Lawrence Commemorative Distinction, to honour the "commendable courage, fortitude and professionalism" displayed by the Canadian and Newfoundland Merchant Navies in that theatre of war.



THE HMCS WEYBURN. (DND, NP-1012)

## **Ships Lost in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence**

*(Numbers of lives lost, where known, are shown in brackets beside the ship's name)*

<b>Ship</b>	<b>Date Sunk</b>	<b>U-Boat</b>
SS <i>Nicoya</i> (6)	1942-05-11	U-553
SS <i>Leto</i> (12)	1942-05-12	U-553
SS <i>Dinaric</i>	1942-07-06	U-132
SS <i>Hainaut</i>	1942-07-06	U-132
SS <i>Anastassios Pateras</i>	1942-07-06	U-132
SS <i>Frederika Lensen</i>	1942-07-20	U-132
SS <i>Chatham</i> (13)	1942-08-27	U-517
SS <i>Arlyn</i> (9)	1942-08-28	U-517
SS <i>Donald Stewart</i> (3)	1942-09-03	U-517
SS <i>Aeas</i> (2)	1942-09-06/07	U-165
HMCS <i>Raccoon</i> (37)	1942-09-06/07	U-165
SS <i>Mount Pindus</i> (2)	1942-09-07	U-517
SS <i>Mount Taygetus</i> (5)	1942-09-07	U-517
SS <i>Oakton</i> (3)	1942-09-07	U-517
HMCS <i>Charlottetown</i> (10)	1942-09-11	U-517
SS <i>Saturnus</i>	1942-09-15	U-517

SS <i>Inger Elisabeth</i>	1942-09-15	U-517
SS <i>Joannis</i> (no fatalities)	1942-09-16	U-165
SS <i>Carolus</i> (11)	1942-10-09	U-69
SS <i>Waterton</i> (no fatalities)	1942-10-11	U-106
SS <i>Caribou</i> (136)	1942-10-14	U-69
HMCS <i>Magog</i> *	1944-10-14	U-1223
HMCS <i>Shawinigan</i> (91)	1944-11-24/25	U-1228

*\* Although it was kept afloat after being torpedoed, the ship was declared a total effective loss upon arrival in port and is thus considered a loss.*

## ROYAL CANADIAN WARSHIPS THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE BATTLE OF THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE

### River Class Frigates

HMCS *Antigonish* \*  
HMCS *Coaticook* \*  
HMCS *Ettrick* \*  
HMCS *Kokanee* \*  
HMCS *La Salle* \*  
HMCS *Lévis* \*  
HMCS *Magog* \*  
HMCS *Orkney* \*  
HMCS *Meon* \*  
HMCS *Springhill* \*  
HMCS *Ste-Thérèse* \*  
HMCS *Stettler* \*  
HMCS *Thetford Mines* \*  
HMCS *Toronto* \*

### Corvettes

HMCS *Agassiz* \*  
HMCS *Amherst* \*  
HMCS *Arrowhead* \*  
HMCS *Brandon* \*  
HMCS *Brantford* \*  
HMCS *Camrose* \*  
HMCS *Charlottetown* \*  
HMCS *Dawson* \*  
HMCS *Hepatica* \*  
HMCS *Kamloops* \*  
HMCS *Kenogami* \*  
HMCS *Kitchener* \*

HMCS *La Malbaie* \*  
HMCS *Lethbridge* \*  
HMCS *Lunenburg* \*  
HMCS *Matapedia* \*  
HMCS *Midland* \*  
HMCS *Nanaimo* \*  
HMCS *Norsyd* \*  
HMCS *Port Arthur* \*  
HMCS *Prescott* \*  
HMCS *Quesnel* \*  
HMCS *Rivière du Loup* \*  
HMCS *Shawinigan* \*  
HMCS *Snowberry* \*  
HMCS *Summerside* \*  
HMCS *Trail* \*  
HMCS *Ville de Québec* \*  
HMCS *Wetaskiwin* \*  
HMCS *Weyburn* \*  
HMCS *Woodstock* \*

### Bangor Minesweepers

HMCS *Brockville* \*  
HMCS *Burlington* \*  
HMCS *Chedabucto* \*  
HMCS *Clayoquot* \*  
HMCS *Digby* \*  
HMCS *Drummondville* \*  
HMCS *Esquimalt* \*  
HMCS *Fort William* \*

HMCS *Gananoque* \*  
 HMCS *Georgian* \*  
 HMCS *Granby* \*  
 HMCS *Grandmère* \*  
 HMCS *Ingonish* \*  
 HMCS *Kenora* \*  
 HMCS *Kentville* \*  
 HMCS *Lachine* \*  
 HMCS *Lockeport* \*  
 HMCS *Medicine Hat* \*  
 HMCS *Melville* \*  
 HMCS *Milltown* \*  
 HMCS *Mulgrave* \*  
 HMCS *Nipigon* \*  
 HMCS *Noranda* \*  
 HMCS *Port Hope* \*  
 HMCS *Red Deer* \*  
 HMCS *Sarnia* \*  
 HMCS *Stratford* \*  
 HMCS *Swift Current* \*  
 HMCS *Trois Rivières* \*  
 HMCS *Truro* \*  
 HMCS *Ungava* \*  
 HMCS *Vegreville* \*  
 HMCS *Westmount* \*

### **Wooden Minesweepers**

HMCS *Llewellyn*  
 HMCS *Lloyd George*

### **Armed Yachts**

HMCS *Elk* \*  
 HMCS *Raccoon* \*  
 HMCS *Reindeer* \*  
 HMCS *Vison* \*

### **Auxiliaries**

HMCS *French* \*

### **Fairmile Motor Launches**

ML 50	ML 72	ML 93
ML 51	ML 73	ML 95
ML 52	ML 74	ML 96
ML 53	ML 75	ML 98
ML 54	ML 76	ML 100
ML 55	ML 77	ML 101
ML 56	ML 79	ML 103
ML 57	ML 80	ML 110
ML 58	ML 81	ML 111
ML 59	ML 82	ML 114
ML 61	ML 83	ML 115
ML 62	ML 84	ML 117
ML 63	ML 85	ML 120
ML 64	ML 86	ML 121
ML 65	ML 87	
ML 66	ML 90	

(\*) Asterisk shows that the ship won the Canadian battle honour *Gulf of St. Lawrence* for operations in the Gulf of St. Lawrence from Québec City to Cabot Strait and the Strait of Belle Isle, between May and October 1942 and/or September and November 1944, the periods when submarines were active in the Gulf.



## **Royal Canadian Air Force Squadrons/Units that Participated in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence**

No. 1	General Reconnaissance School
No. 5	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 7	Operational Training Unit
No. 8	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 10	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 11	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 31	General Reconnaissance School
No. 31	Operational Training Unit
No. 113	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 116	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 117	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 119	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 130	(Fighter) Squadron
No. 145	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 160	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 161	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*
No. 162	(Bomber-Reconnaissance) Squadron*

*(\*) Asterisk shows that the Squadron won the battle honour North West Atlantic for operations by Bomber-Reconnaissance squadrons of Eastern Air Command, RCAF, throughout the period of the war. This battle honour encompasses service during the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.*

## SOME FIGURES ON THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE AREA CONVOYS\*

Convoy Between	First/Last Convoys	Total Convoys/Ships
Corner Brook–Sydney	1942-05-21/1944-12-24	104/237
Sydney–Corner Brook	1942-05-19/1944-12-30	98/188
Québec–Labrador	1942-06-25/1944-10-26	28/96
Labrador–Québec	1942-07-04/1944-11-04	30/99
Québec–Sydney	1942-05-17/1944-12-14	93/976
Sydney–Québec	1942-05-17/1944-11-19	90/666

*Note: The designated names of East Coast convoys during the Second World War were normally based on where the convoys originated and ended (e.g., a QS convoy was one that traveled between Quebec City and Sydney, Nova Scotia).*

*\* Data extracted from Gilbert Norman Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History (Ottawa, King's Printer, 1952) vol. 2, pp. 538-539.*