

Subs, Spies, and Weather Stations: U-Boat Activity off Canada's East Coast During The Second World War

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On the first Sunday of every May, grey-haired veterans gather to commemorate the longest and most bitterly fought campaign of the Second World War. Of late, these ranks have swelled to include merchant mariners who have finally received their due from a rightly, shamed-faced Canadian government. Mostly the talk is of comrades, many long gone, and battles fought in the timeless wastes of the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, it was there, particularly in what was known as the Black Pit, that many a ship and its crew met their demise. Some, however, remember another theatre; one just as cold, windswept, and deadly – the east coast of Canada.

In the waters now comprising Canada's 200-mile limit, but then called the Canadian Northwest Atlantic, lie the rusting hulls of hundreds of merchant ships, nine Canadian warships and five German U-boats. While these hulks represent only a small total of the ships and men from both sides who fought and died during the Battle of the Atlantic, they serve to show today's generation just how close the war came to Canada. The Battle of the Atlantic, indeed, the Second World War was not "out there," hundreds and thousands of miles away. It was right offshore. This fact has only become well known over the past fifteen years with the work of such noted Canadian historians as Marc Milner and Michael Hadley. Hadley's *U-Boats Against Canada* is the primary reference for anyone who studies U-boat activity on the east coast of Canada. Canadian territorial waters were as much a battleground as the wind tossed wastes of the North Atlantic. It is somehow apropos that the last Canadian warship to be sunk in World War II was torpedoed just outside Halifax harbour.

When Hitler finally declared war on the United States on December 11, 1942, Karl Dönitz, the *Befelschaber der Uboote*, or Commander-in-Chief of U-boats, was relieved.¹ It finally ended the "Undeclared War" that had been raging for months between his U-boats and American forces in the North Atlantic.² What had started as the Americans maintaining a Neutrality Patrol had slowly but surely progressed to blatant escort of British convoys. This had not been without cost to the United States. In September 1941, U652 had torpedoed USS *Greer*, USS *Kearney* had been hit on October 10, and on October 31, USS *Reuben James* had been sunk by U522. Now that the United States was officially in the war, Dönitz reasoned that with the Americans attention now diverted to the Pacific, the whole east coast of the United States would be wide open for attack.³ Unfortunately, Canadian waters were also included in this vision⁴ and, over the next two and a half years, the Canadian Northwest Atlantic would become a frontline.

¹Günther Hessler, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945, Vol. II (London: HMSO, 1989), p.1.

²Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days, (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1990), p.183.

³Miller, Nathan, The War at Sea, (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 291.

⁴ Günther Hessler, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945, Vol. II, p. 4.

The first sinking in “Canadian” waters occurred January 12, 1942 when Reinhard Hardegan's U123 sank the British steamer *Cyclops* approximately one hundred miles southeast of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia.⁵ Hardegan was one of eight U-boats that made up the first of three waves of the initial assault on North America, code-named *Paukenschlag* or “drumbeat.” Hardegan was really just passing through Canadian waters on his way to his station off New York, as Operation *Paukenschlag* was not supposed to start until the next day when his group mates were all expected to be in position. However, *Cyclops* was just too good a target to let go, and Admiral Dönitz had given permission to attack large vessels if they presented themselves.⁶ *Cyclops* was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

However, three medium sized U-boats which had been detached from Group *Seydlitz* in mid-Atlantic in early January and ordered to Canadian waters, arrived as planned⁷ Eric Topp in U552 patrolled approximately 50 miles off Cape Race, Heinrich Bleichrodt in U109 took station south of the Grand Banks, and Ernst Kals in U130 guarded the Cabot Strait.⁸ Kals drew first blood, sinking both *Frisco* and *Friar Rock* on January 14th. Next was Topp who sank *Dayrose* on the 15th, and *Frances Salman* on the 18th. By this time, Walter Schug in U86 had also arrived and gained position near Cape St. Francis. There he sank the 4271-ton Greek steamship *Dimitrios O. Thermiotis*. Meanwhile, Bleichrodt's U109 had reached a position 115 miles southeast of Halifax and on the 19th, sank the *Empire Kingfisher* just south of Cape Sable. On the 23rd he sank the 4887-ton British steamer *Thilby* with one torpedo.⁹ Of the four boats, U109 would have the least success in Canadian waters, being constantly plagued with dud torpedoes, as were all of the *Paukenschlag* first wave.¹⁰ It got so bad that Eric Topp's U522 was forced to hold up one freighter with nothing more than a machine gun.¹¹ Topp claimed to have sunk the vessel with 126 rounds from his 8.8mm deck gun, however, Allied records do not support this claim.¹²

Hot on the heels of the first wave of *Paukenschlag* were the boats of the second. Although most were destined for the still mostly virgin waters off the US eastern seaboard, all traversed Canadian waters and some claimed victims. Those boats ordered to the east coast of Canada

⁵Spencer Dunmore, *In Great Waters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1999), p.144.

⁶Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p.205.

⁷Günther Hessler, *The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945*, Vol. II, p. 4.

⁸Michael Hadley, *U-Boats Against Canada* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), p.63.

⁹Jurgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes 1939 - 1945* (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1983), pp. 73-77.

¹⁰Michael Hadley, *U-boats Against Canada*, p.71.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 472.

concentrated in three areas: the east coast of Newfoundland, the western side of the Cabot Strait, and the Halifax Approaches. Operating from January 21 to February 19, nine U-boats sank a total of 13 ships and damaged two more. In one notable episode, U754 commanded by Gerhard Bigalk sank the 3876-ton Greek steamship *Mount Kithern* with two torpedoes a mere two miles from St. John's Harbour. By the time the third wave hit Canadian waters in early February, targets were not as plentiful and air surveillance frequently forced the boats to dive. While U96 under Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock experienced considerable success, sinking five ships in eighteen days, the rest did not fare so well. The third wave produced the first U-boat losses in North American waters. As part of the "bases for destroyers" deal between Britain and the United States, the USN had started construction on the Argentia Naval Air Station in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. Eventually encompassing 3,392 acres of land, it would become the most expensive military installation anywhere outside the continental United States during World War II.¹³ On March 1, Naval Reserve Ensign William Tapune, flying a Lockheed Hudson out of Argentia, surprised U656 (Kröning) on the surface approximately 25 miles south of Cape Race. Taken totally unprepared, the U-boat was sunk with all hands.¹⁴ Fifteen days later, another patrol from Argentia sank U503 (Gericke) south of the Virgin Rocks approximately 200 miles east of St. John's.¹⁵

Despite these losses, Dönitz's offensive on the east coast of Canada had been successful. Between January and March U-Boats sank a total of forty-four ships in Canadian waters.¹⁶ As this figure represented 20 percent of the total sunk worldwide¹⁷, the Canadian government could not keep such news from the public. In the face of growing sensationalism in the press, the authorities were forced to make a statement. On March 5, LCdr. William Strange, RCNVR, of Plans and Operations in National Services Headquarters in Ottawa, admitted to a local Canadian Club audience and the press that U-boats were operating in Canadian waters. However, he added that this was to be expected and not to give such incursions "unreasonable prominence."¹⁸ Furthermore, he stated that the government would, in future, refrain from making announcements concerning "maritime operations" so as not to reveal any information to the enemy.¹⁹ This would become harder to do in the months to come, as U-boats penetrated the Gulf of St. Lawrence and ships were sunk in the St. Lawrence River itself.

¹³ John N. Cardolis, *A Friendly Invasion*, (St. John's: Breakwater, 1990), p.26.

¹⁴ Capt. Joseph Prim and John McCarthy, *Those in Peril* (St. John's: Jespersen Publishing, 1995), pp. 78-9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael Hadley, *U-boats Against Canada*, p.79.

¹⁷ Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 771.

¹⁸ Michael Hadley, *U-boats Against Canada*, p.81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The Battle of the St. Lawrence, as it was coined by the *Ottawa Journal*, was not actually a battle but a series of effective U-boat sorties that would account for the heaviest Canadian losses in the inshore zone.²⁰ Recognising the Gulf as a hub of both local and trans-Atlantic shipping²¹, Dönitz would send six U-boats over six months which would attack seven convoys, sink twenty merchantmen, a loaded troopship, and two Royal Canadian Navy warships. The *pièce de résistance*, as far as domestic impact was concerned, would be the sinking of the Sydney to Port-Aux-Basque passenger ferry *SS Caribou* with the loss of 136 people including 10 children.

The opening shots of the battle were fired by Kapitänleutnant Karl Thurmman's U553 in the early hours of May 12, 1942. At approximately 0615 GMT (about 3:15 Canadian Atlantic time), Thurmman sank the 5364-ton British steamer *Nicoya* 16 10 miles north of Pointe à la Frégate on the Gaspé Peninsula. He followed this up a few hours later by sinking the 4712-ton Dutch ship *Leto* en route from the UK to Montreal. An hour later Thurmman claimed a hit on a 3000-ton vessel, although official records do not indicate a sinking at this time.²² Canadian authorities immediately initiated convoys, and prompted the Eastern Air Command to increase air patrols both inside and outside the Gulf. As well, on May 21 Cape Gaspé Light including outer beacons was extinguished.²³ However, by this time U553 was on her way out of the Gulf headed for the Bay of Fundy and the coast of the United States. Nevertheless, the Canadian reaction was prudent as another U-boat would soon take her place.

On June 30, U132 under the command of Kapitänleutnant Ernst Vogelsang penetrated the Cabot Strait and entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence. For the first few days he reconnoitred the area but despite the presence of targets his efforts were frustrated by mist and/or distance. However, in the early hours of July 6, Vogelsang sighted and tracked the Quebec-Sydney convoy QS-15. Shortly thereafter, he initiated an attack which Eastern Air Command would later describe as "the greatest loss that was sustained in any one locality" off the east coast of Canada. In the space of a few minutes, Vogelsang sank the Belgian *Hianaut*, the Greek *Anastassios Pateras*, and the British registered *Dinaric*.²⁴ However, this attack was not without consequences for U132. The U-boat was sighted and attacked by the Bangor minesweeper HMCS *Drummondville* (Lt. J. P. Fraser, RCNVR) and given a severe going over. The attack exacerbated previous battle damage, most notable being the Main Ballast Pump which controlled the boat's trim. Slowly U132 sank to 185 metres (approx. 560 feet). With only 80 Kg of compressed air left to blow the ballast tanks, Vogelsang decided to surface and put his faith in the darkness and the U-boat's speed and manoeuvrability. Although spotted by one of the escorts, now 2 miles distant, U132 eluded him in the darkness. When Vogelsang finally reached the 100-metre sounding, he submerged and lay on the bottom to affect repairs.

²⁰Ibid., p.82.

²¹Günther Hessler, The U-Boat War in the Atlantic 1939 - 1945, Vol. II, p. 37.

²²Jurgen Rohwer, Axis Submarine Successes 1939 - 1945 , p.95.

²³Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p.93.

²⁴Jurgen Rohwer, Axis Submarine Successes 1939 - 1945 , p.107.

For the next week, U132 patrolled the Strait of Belle Isle but sighted no favourable targets. He therefore deemed this area to be “unfavourable”²⁵ and headed back to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, where he had his previous success. He arrived off Cap de la Madeleine on July 20 and sighted the Quebec - Sydney convoy QS-19 escorted by HMCS *Weyburn*, HMCS *Chedebucto*, and the two Fairmile patrol boats *Q-074* and *Q-059*. In a daring daylight attack, Vogelsang penetrated the convoy at periscope depth and fired two torpedoes. One hit the SS *Frederick Lensen*, so severely damaging her that when towed to Grand Vallée Bay, she broke in half and sank. U132 made its escape in the resulting confusion and, traversing the Cabot Strait unmolested, sent a lengthy situation report on July 24. She arrived home safely after a patrol of sixty-eight days, having steamed 10,000 miles. With her score of five ships sunk, the patrol was considered “a fine success.”²⁶

Things would be fairly quiet for the next month. There were no sinkings in the Gulf itself, but there was some activity to the east of Nova Scotia. The east coast of North America was no longer the “Happy Hunting Ground” it had been the previous six months. Few ships now travelled alone and the last seven U-boats that operated off the coast found few valuable targets.²⁷ U458(Diggins) claimed a 4870-ton merchantman, but U89's bag was only the 54-ton schooner *Lucille M*, and U754's(Oestermann) the 260-ton American fishing vessel *Ebb* 120 miles south of Halifax. However, there were still targets to be found in the Gulf and the alarm would sound all the way to Ottawa.

The next phase of the Battle of the St. Lawrence actually started in the Strait of Belle Isle. In the predawn hours of August 27, Kapitänleutnant Paul Hartwig, in command of U517, attacked the American troop ship SS *Chatham*. She was the first US troop ship to be lost during the war but fortunately loss of life was slight.²⁸ U517 escaped on the surface unseen while Hartwig's packmate, U165(Hoffmann) attacked the 3304-ton SS *Arlyn* and the 7253-ton tanker SS *Laramie*. *Laramie* survived with five casualties but the *Arlyn* sank an hour later with the loss of thirteen passengers and crew.

Hartwig continued further south into the Strait and decided to investigate Forteau Bay which *Sailing Directions*²⁹ suggested might be an anchorage for merchantmen in the western end of the Strait of Belle Isle. In the dark hours of September 1, Hartwig entered the bay and ventured within 65 feet of the main jetty in search of targets. Finding none, he departed the bay unscathed and undetected. Continuing along the Labrador coast, Hartwig sighted not one but two convoys: the inbound NL-6 and outbound LN-7. With the escorts occupied with preventing the two convoys from mixing, U517 was able to get in position to fire at the 1781-ton laker SS *Donald Stewart*. Just at the moment of

²⁵Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 103.

²⁶Tony Germain, Cdr., RCN(ret'd), The Sea at our Gates (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), p.117.

²⁷Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 107.

²⁸Ibid., p. 112.

²⁹A manual issued to mariners giving information on harbours, currents, navigational beacons, etc.

firing, Hartwig was spotted by one of the escorts, HMCS *Weyburn*, who turned to ram. Unable to overtake U517 as she submerged, the *Weyburn* opened up with her 4-inch gun but missed. *Donald Stewart* sank with the loss of three of her crew and U517 escaped.

Meanwhile, U165 had been tracking the Quebec-Sydney convoy QS-33 consisting of eight merchantmen with five escorts including the converted yacht HMCS *Racoon*. In the darkness on September 6, U165 fired a salvo at the 2988-ton Greek *Aeas* and sank her. Two of the torpedoes passed her and shortly thereafter, *Racoon* reported being attacked by two torpedoes, one of which went right underneath her. She then apparently ran up the torpedo track for 6,000 yards dropping depth charges. Approximately two and a half hours later two explosions in rapid succession were heard. It was assumed that *Racoon* was attacking a contact but, despite a search and calls for her to report her position, she was never seen again. Two weeks later, wreckage identified as from the yacht washed up on Anticosti Island, and a month after the sinking, the badly decomposed body of one of her officers was found by a patrol. A board of inquiry concluded that she had been sunk due to enemy action.³⁰ Unfortunately this could not be confirmed after the war as U165 had been sunk along with her log book on her way back to France after this patrol.

Shortly after the loss of HMCS *Racoon*, the Royal Canadian Navy was to lose another one of its warships to the enemy. HMCS *Charlottetown*, in company with two other corvettes, was sunk just off Cap Chat on September 11, 1942 by U517. Her loss dominated newspapers for a week after the news was released.³¹ People were prepared to hear of warship losses in the dangerous wastes of the Atlantic ocean where packs of Dönitz's U-boats set upon hapless convoys. But not in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Merchantmen were one thing, but warships were supposed to be sinking subs, not the other way around. However, the real tragedy of the *Charlottetown* was that most of the casualties were caused by the ship's own depth charges. None had been set to *Safe*, and consequently, when the sinking hull reached the preset depth of the charges, they exploded. Of her entire crew of close to a hundred men, only fifty-seven survivors were rescued, three of whom later died ashore. The perpetrator of the attack, the redoubtable Paul Hartwig escaped retribution from the hands of the *Charlottetown's* associates and would sink two more ships before heading for home. In total, the U517 accounted for eight vessels including the *Charlottetown*.³²

Public outcry over the sinkings in the Gulf, and pressure from the British Admiralty, forced Ottawa to close the St. Lawrence River to all but local convoys.³³ Trans-Atlantic shipping would be rerouted to other ports in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick as well as the United States.³⁴ As a result, when Kapitänleutnant Ulrich Gräf and the crew of U69 entered the Gulf on September 30, they found

³⁰Michael Hadley, *U-boats Against Canada*, p. 118.

³¹Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.107.

³²Jurgen Rohwer, *Axis Submarine Successes 1939*, pp. 119-126.

³³Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century*, p. 108.

³⁴*Ibid.*

no targets. He retraced U132's track up the St. Lawrence River and on the night of 8/9 October sighted the homeward-bound convoy NL-9. Despite the presence of three escorting corvettes, Gräf fired at, and sank, the 2245-ton steamship *SS Carolus* with the loss of twelve of her crew. This sinking, a mere 173 miles from Quebec City, the furthest penetration of the River to date, caused an uproar in both Quebec and Ottawa.³⁵ However, it would be nothing compared to the distress caused by the sinking of Gräf's next victim.

The Sydney to Port-aux-Basque ferry *SS Caribou* left Sydney for her last trip at approximately 9:30 P.M., on October 10, 1942. According to her escort, the Bangor minesweeper HMCS *Grandmere*, the night was very dark with no moon.³⁶ *Grandmere's* skipper, Lt. James Cuthbert was unhappy about both the amount of smoke *Caribou* was making and also his screening position.³⁷ In his mind the best place for him to be was in front of the *Caribou*, not behind, as WACI³⁸ advised. He felt he would be better able to detect the sound of a lurking U-boat in their path if he had a clear field in front to probe.³⁹ He was correct, for in *Caribou's* path lay the U69.

At 3:21 A.M. U69 spotted the *Caribou* "belching heavy smoke."⁴⁰ He misidentified both the 2222-ton *Caribou* and *Grandmere* as a 6500-ton passenger freighter and a "two-stack destroyer."⁴¹ At 3:40 A.M., according to *Grandmere's* log, a lone torpedo hit *Caribou* on her starboard side. Pandemonium ensued as passengers, thrown from their bunks by the explosion rushed topside to the lifeboat stations. For some reason, several families had been accommodated in separate cabins and now sought each other in the confusion. In addition, several lifeboats and rafts had either been destroyed in the explosion or could not be launched. One passenger, Harold Janes, surveying the situation proclaimed, "Everybody for themselves and God for us all," and jumped overboard into the cold October water.⁴² Many would follow suit.

Meanwhile, *Grandmere* had spotted U69 in the dark and turned to ram. Gräf, still under the impression he was facing a "destroyer" rather than a minesweeper, crash dived.⁴³ As *Grandmere* passed over the swirl left by the submerged submarine, Lt. Cuthbert fired a diamond pattern of six

³⁵Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 132.

³⁶Douglas How, Night of the Caribou (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1988), p.46.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Western Approaches Convoy Instructions

³⁹Douglas How, Night of the Caribou, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁰Ibid. p.61.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid. p.73.

⁴³Ibid. p.72.

depth charges. Gräf, meanwhile, headed for the sounds of the *Caribou* sinking to the bottom, knowing that the survivors left floating on the surface would inhibit *Grandmere* from launching another attack.⁴⁴ However, U69's manoeuvre went unnoticed by *Grandmere* and Cuthbert dropped another patter of three charges set for 500 feet. Gräf fired a *Bold*, a asdic decoy the British referred to as a GNAT⁴⁵, and slowly but surely left the area. At 6:30 A.M. *Grandmere* gave up the hunt and started to pick up survivors. They were too few. Of the 237 people aboard only 103 were found alive. Two died shortly thereafter.

Of the forty-six man crew, mostly Newfoundlanders, only fifteen remained. Five families were decimated: the Tappers (5 dead), the Toppers (4), the Allens (3), the Tavernors (the captain and his two sons), and the Skinners (3). The press truthfully reported that "Many Families [were] Wiped Out."⁴⁶ This would be the last sinking in the Gulf until 1944, but not the last to shock the people of Newfoundland.

At approximately 3AM, November 2, 1942, U518 under the command of Kapitänleutnant Friedrich Wissmann rounded the southern end of Bell Island and entered the sheltered Wabana anchorage, locally know as "The Tickle." There, silhouetted in the light of a searchlight, he found several ore carriers at anchor. At approximately 3:30 he fired one torpedo at the 3000-ton *Anna T*. It missed, passed under the bow of the SS *Flyingdale*, and exploded ashore at the loading dock. Wissmann then fired two torpedoes at the SS *Rose Castle*. It is interesting to note that the month previous, U69, having just sunk the *Caribou*, fired a torpedo at *Rose Castle* just outside St. John's harbour. Fortunately for the ship at the time, it was a dud. She was not so lucky this time. She sank, taking with her twenty-eight of her crew, five of whom were Newfoundlanders.

The next target was the Free French vessel *PLM 27*. 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, U518 escaped on the surface in the darkness. In a ten-minute attack, two ships had been lost along with forty men. The incident had a sense of *déjà vu* about it, as the same thing had happened two months previous.

On the night of September 4, U513 under the command of Rolf Ruggeberg followed the ore carrier *Evelyn B* into Conception Bay. Spending the night submerged in 80 feet of water, she rose to periscope depth the next morning and sank two ships, SS *Saganaga* and SS *Lord Strathcona*. Having been damaged by a collision with *Strathcona*, Ruggeberg left the scene, once again trailing the *Evelyn B*. Two ships and the bodies of twenty-nine men lay on the bottom of Conception Bay.

There was something else interesting about U518's foray into Conception Bay. Sinking shipping was not her only mission. On board the U-boat that cold November night was Werner von Janowski, Abwehr spy. Evading patrols in Conception Bay, and surviving a surprise attack by a Digby bomber just south of Cape Race, U518 made its way through the Cabot Strait and into the Gulf of St.

⁴⁴Ibid. p.85.

⁴⁵German Naval Acoustic Target

⁴⁶Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 138.

Lawrence. Initially, the plan was to land von Janowski at a point in the St. Lawrence River.⁴⁷ This was discarded in favour of Baie des Chaleurs, between New Brunswick and the Gaspé Peninsula.⁴⁸ On the morning of November 8, U518 entered the mouth of the bay. With no shoals and a depth exceeding 200 feet, the bay offered clear passage for the U-boat. Surfacing that night, Wissmann beached the U-boat on a shoal not far from the shore and Janowski was taken ashore in a dingy. All went well, and at 1:20 A.M. November 9, the dingy returned and U-518 lifted her bows off the sandbar and departed the bay. Wissmann was well satisfied and considered the mission a success.⁴⁹ Unknown to Kapitänleutnant Wissmann, his passenger would be caught within 24 hours.

Von Janowski was not a naval officer, despite his claim and the uniform he had worn ashore. He was of poor character and had actually lived in Canada in the early 1930's. He had a wife in Toronto whom he had apparently fleeced for thousands of dollars before returning to Germany. He had spent time in the French Foreign Legion, had been sent to Dachau concentration camp, and eventually ended up in a "dirty tricks" squad of the Wehrmacht during the first part of the war. It was this duty, and some difficulty with the Gestapo, that led him to volunteer to go to Canada as a spy.⁵⁰ However, he was not a very good spy and, as a result of several blunders on both his part and that of his handlers in Germany, was soon captured.⁵¹ Von Janowski claimed prisoner of war status and was eventually turned into a double agent of dubious advantage.

Werner von Janowski was not the first spy to be landed in Canada, just the most celebrated. Several others were rumoured to have been landed on Canadian shores.⁵² However, just one other was captured. Actually, he turned himself in, having lived for a while in Ottawa and exhausted his funds. On May 12, 1942, Alfred Langbein came ashore near St. John, New Brunswick from U213 (von Varhendorff). He spent some time in St. John and Montreal, but ultimately moved to Ottawa where he spent fourteen months before turning himself in to police in October 1944. Like Janowski, Langbein was an intelligence disappointment⁵³ and spent the remainder of the war in an internment camp in New Brunswick.⁵⁴

⁴⁷Dean Beeby, Cargo of Lies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 17.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 105-113.

⁵¹Janowski discarded a Belgian matchbox at a restaurant in New Carlisle, NB, and paid for his meal with oversized and discontinued Canadian money.

⁵²Dean Beeby, Cargo of Lies , p.164.

⁵³By the time he was interrogated, any information Langbein gave to the authorities was outdated.

⁵⁴Dean Beeby, Cargo of Lies , p.164.

U-boats did more than just sink ships and land spies on Canada's east coast. Due to its geographical location, Canada was a natural choice when it came to prisoners of war. Separated from Germany and her Axis partners by thousands of miles in any direction, as well as having an abundance of wide-open spaces, Canada was a perfect place for POW camps. Many in these camps were U-boatmen, including the most famous “ace” of World War II, “Silent Otto” Kretschmer. Kretschmer was captured in March 1941, and after interrogation became a guest of His Majesty's Canadian Government in Camp 30, Bowmanville, Ontario. Kretschmer was no Nazi, but he was a patriot and considered it his duty to carry on the war in any way he could.⁵⁵ He became a thorn in the side of the camp authorities and it was in his position as senior German officer in the camp that he engineered a mass breakout of prisoners.⁵⁶ Through a prearranged code sent in personal letters home through the Red Cross, Kretschmer was able to co-ordinate a rendezvous with a U-boat to meet the escaped prisoners and transport them back home to Germany. Unfortunately for Kretschmer, Canadian Naval Intelligence learned of the plan in the spring of 1943 and informed the RCMP. Acting on this information, they discovered a 300-foot tunnel leading to the camp's perimeter. Furthermore, a search of both the prisoners and their belonging produced a chart pinpointing the location of the rendezvous with the U-boat.

Rear Admiral L. W. Murray, C-in-C, Canadian North West Atlantic, saw this as a chance to capture a U-boat intact and appointed veteran destroyer captain, LCdr. Desmond “Debbie” Piers, RCN, to the job. The pickup point was, once again, Baie des Chaleurs, and Piers's initial plan was to lure the U-boat close to shore and, with volunteers disguised as the supposed escapees, take over the sub. Chances of success were deemed “infinitesimal” and the Admiralty in London persuaded the RCN to destroy the sub rather than try to capture it.⁵⁷ On September 24, U536, under the command of Kapitänleutnant Rolf Schauenburg, approached Baie des Chaleurs. He was disturbed to find the entrance barred by a cordon of “destroyers.”⁵⁸ Passing successfully through the line of warships, Schauenburg suspicions were further raised by the complete lack of other shipping in the bay, as well as the absence of important landmarks.⁵⁹

Spending the day submerged and surfacing at night to recharge batteries, Schauenburg and his officers got the distinct impression that the warships were looking for them.⁶⁰ The sense of entrapment increased when a radio signal was received on a different frequency than the one assigned.

⁵⁵Jordan Vause, Wolf: U-Boat Commanders in World War II (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), p. 215.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 178-9.

⁵⁸U-Boat skippers tended to identify anything above a patrol boat as a destroyer. What Schauenburg actually saw were corvettes.

⁵⁹Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 181.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Just as unnerving was a light signal from shore which simply said *Komm, Komm* [Come, Come] in plain language. Finally, when Schauenburg and his crew heard depth charges “out of the blue,” they decided the rescue was hopeless and turned their attention to their own escape.⁶¹ U536 headed for Miscou Flats on the correct assumption that the warships would not be inclined to drop depth charges in shallow water for fear of damaging themselves.⁶² He lay on the bottom throughout the next day and exited the bay that night close to shore, sometimes with barely enough water overhead to cover the conning tower. At one point they became entangled in a net from a fishing trawler and could hear the trawler’s winches struggling with the strain. U536 successfully escaped the trap and on October 4, south of St. Mary’s Bay, Newfoundland, radioed Berlin that the operation had been a failure. Schauenburg spent the next few weeks patrolling off Nova Scotia without any luck and eventually joined *Gruppe Schill2* trailing the UK to Gibraltar/Freetown convoy MKS-30/SL-139. She was detected and ultimately sunk by the Canadian corvettes HMCS *Snowberry* (Lt. J. A. Dunne, RCNVR) and HMCS *Calgary* (LCdr. H. K. Hill, RCNVR), and the British frigate HMS *Nene*. There were seventeen survivors.

U536’s mission was not the only bid to rescue escaped prisoners of war from camps in Canada. The previous May, U262 commanded by Kapitänleutnant Heinz Franke, attempted to rescue escaped prisoners from Camp 70 near Fredericton, New Brunswick. The pickup point was supposed to be off North Point, Prince Edward Island, where Franke was instructed to be in position by May 2nd.⁶³ Despite pack ice that damaged his boat and submerged running that almost exhausted his batteries, Franke made it, but to no avail. Upon reaching the rendezvous he saw an air patrol of three planes. Now suspicious that the plan had been betrayed, but also considering (correctly) that he was probably in the flight path of a training field, he waited until May 6, before aborting the mission.⁶⁴ Exiting the Gulf, the way he had come, Franke replenished from the U-tanker U459 and made it safely home to France. It was only after the war that Franke learned that the escape had been scrubbed after an earlier attempt had prompted increased camp surveillance.⁶⁵

Possibly the most interesting and, until its discovery in 1981, unknown foray into Canadian waters involved an actual landing by German forces on Canadian soil. While there have been other claims, this is the only documented case.⁶⁶ On October 22, 1943, crewmen from U537, accompanied by two scientists, went ashore in what is now called Martin Bay in northern Labrador. Their purpose was to set up an unmanned weather station.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³Historian Marc Milner used this episode as the basis for his novel *Incident at North Point* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1998).

⁶⁴Michael Hadley, *U-boats Against Canada*, p. 174.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶⁶A German engineer who was working at the Bay d’Espoir Hydro Project told co-workers that as a U-boat crewman during the war, he had come ashore there to get fresh water.

Weather reporting was vital to the Germans in planning their military operations.⁶⁷ Weather systems generally travel from West to East, and consequently, Admiral Dönitz insisted that his U-boats send weather reports on a regular basis. Many U-boats, having used all their torpedoes early on in their patrol were kept on station for just this purpose. However, as time went on, skippers were less inclined to expose themselves to Allied direction-finding stations.⁶⁸ Consequently, Germany built a number of automatic weather stations which were dispersed in Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, including Spitsbergen, Bear Island, and Greenland.⁶⁹ This plan also included North America. During the summer of 1943, U537 under Kapitänleutnant Peter Schrewe was dispatched to land weather station WFL-26 in Northern Labrador. On board were Dr. Kurt Sommermeyer and his assistant Walter Hildebrant. The two civilians were to supervise the assembly of “Kurt,” as the station was code-named.

After a difficult voyage across the Atlantic which prevented proper navigational sightings, and resulted in the sub’s anti-aircraft gun being torn off the deck by high seas, U537 arrived off Cape Chidley at 1230 hours on October 22. Guided by echo sounder, Schrewe worked southward, rounding the Hutton Peninsula and finally entering Attinaukjoke Bay, now called Martin Bay. At 2130 hours, the weather station, two scientists, and several of the crew, were bundled into dinghies and brought ashore. With guards posted, and while storm damage to the U-boat was repaired, the landing party set up the weather station. At 1803 hours on October 3, less than twenty-four hours after landing, “Kurt” started sending signals across the Atlantic. The party returned to the U-boat and at 2240, twenty-eight hours after arriving, U537 weighed anchor and headed home. Despite being the object of “Operation Salmon” by thirteen warships for most of November, U537 safely arrived in Lorient December 8, 1943.

Canada’s east coast was not a backwater of the Atlantic war, but a front line. The Battle of the St. Lawrence was a defeat for the Royal Canadian Navy which overshadowed the collapse of the navy’s other major effort in the mid-Atlantic in 1943.⁷⁰ U-boats would continue to prowl Canadian waters, and ships would still be sunk in plain sight of shore. The RCN would lose several more ships to U-boats, the most notorious being HMCS *Valleyfield*.⁷¹ As previously mentioned, the last loss to the RCN would occur just outside Halifax Harbour a month before V-E Day. At war’s end, two U-

⁶⁷Michael Hadley, U-boats Against Canada, p. 163.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Marc Milner, Canada’s Navy: The First Century, p. 109. Due to the severe losses in RCN escorted convoys, in the Spring of 1943 RCN ships were pulled out of the Mid Ocean Escort Force. They were either sent for training or assigned to less dangerous areas. It was considered a humiliating defeat by the RCN which eventually led to the reassignment of the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Percy Nelles.

⁷¹Sunk by U548, May 7, 1944. One hundred twenty five of her one hundred sixty-three man crew perished, many due to exposure.

boats would surrender to Canadian forces off the east coast of Canada; U190 and U889. Both would be incorporated into the RCN.

The story of the U-boat war off our coast is a story of suffering and death, courage and valour, brilliance and criminal stupidity. Politics - local, national and international - played a major role, and unfortunately, it was the men at sea who paid the price. However, in the overall scheme of things, the activity off our coast did not seriously impact on the course of either the Battle of the Atlantic nor the war. While the closure of the St. Lawrence River significantly affected the local ports and populations, the traffic was more than adequately handled by such other major ports as Halifax, St. John, and New York. Whereas the sinkings in 1942 represented twenty percent of those worldwide, they were nothing compared to the slaughter occurring at the same time off the coast of the United States. Furthermore, while such tragedies as the loss of the *Caribou* brought the war home to the Canadian population, they were really insignificant compared to the importance of the trans-Atlantic convoys that were the RCN's main responsibility.

In all fairness, the Royal Canadian Navy was stretched to the breaking point by requests from both the British and Americans for escorts during the major assaults in Canadian waters in 1942 and 1944. In 1942, badly needed assets were assigned to the American eastern seaboard and the Caribbean to help stop the haemorrhage of oil tankers that was taking place in those theatres. More were sent to the Mediterranean, as well, to participate in the invasion of North Africa, code-named Operation Torch. During 1944, the experienced and properly equipped RCN ships that could have made an impact in home waters were assigned to the same task in the English Channel, protecting the Normandy invasion fleet.

It is the aforementioned escapades, and others, that make up the lore of the Royal Canadian Navy. However, when veterans reminisce on Battle of the Atlantic Sunday, they talk about more than just *Far Distant Ships* on *The North Atlantic Run*,⁷² they talk of the battle right here at home and how they had to "take a hit for the team."⁷³ The true story of the Royal Canadian Navy and its battle in home waters is only now being told by such historians as Marc Milner, Michael Hadley, Brian Tennyson and Roger Sarty. It was as bitterly fought as the larger, more well known, contest in the world's stormiest ocean. However, as can be seen, Canada's Battle of the Atlantic was a little more complicated than is popularly known—and it was against *subs, spies, and weather stations*.

⁷²*Far Distant Ships* by LCdr. Joseph Schull, RCN, *North Atlantic Run* by Marc Milner.

⁷³Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century*, p. 109.

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