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## The Canso Defence Area - The Second World War on the Home Front

### ABSTRACT

Half of the first troops that served in the Canso Defence Area, were residents of Guysborough, that were recruited and trained here. The story of how they were brought together, was the story of war on the Homefront in Canada.

Neither self-evident nor apparent as the war unfolded; was the influence of events on the world stage that often-precipitated change and action on the home front. Such was the case in the Canso Defence Area.

This is that story.

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## Prologue

On September 15, 1917 a recruiting officer came to “Guisborough”, and took lodgings at Grants’ Hotel. He held a meeting at Chedabucto Hall, now the Masonic Hall, in which a large crowd was in attendance. Amongst the throng, was a young Laurier C. Grant who enrolled with the 85th Nova Scotia Highlanders, along with several of his friends that day, much to his mother’s chagrin.<sup>1</sup>

Laurier Grant never made it overseas for one reason and another. He was due to go after passing several hurdles, but posted on his unit’s bulletin board, was a notice that he was to be deferred for a time. He was surprised to learn of that deferral, along with a 30-day pass of leave without pay from July 30th, 1918 onward. He was flummoxed, but later learned that his father applied for a pass on his behalf on the grounds that he was employed in the essential service of lumbering.

By the time his pass expired, it became evident that the allies were clearly winning the war, and that his services were no longer required. But just in case, he was advised by military district number 6 at Halifax, that his pass was extended to 14 January 1919 should he ever be needed. By that time though, the war was over, and young Laurier was discharged.<sup>2</sup>

Laurier Grant returned to his community. He lived and served in Guysborough with distinction and as a community leader. Notably he retained his military ties to the 85th Nova Scotia Highlanders who would come to call upon him again in later years.

In the meantime, following the war, people simply wanted to get on with their lives. But it wasn’t as simple as all that. There was much left unresolved after the Great War. Many rifts, grievances, imbalances, and injustices were created as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles, for Germany in particular.

Germany suffered several economic crises and economic depressions in its aftermath, that were the seed bed for discontent and revolution. On top of that,

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<sup>1</sup> Laurier C. Grant, “**Recollections Of Life In Guysborough**”, January 1987 (Self published memoir), pg. 68

<sup>2</sup> Ibid Laurier C. Grant, 1987, pg. 70-71

Germany was held largely to blame for the Great War; and made to pay its costs through onerous reparations, that added to the peoples suffering.

By 1933, Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in the vain hope by the government of the day, that he would be a unifying power for a peaceful Germany. Hitler worked wonders and soon lifted Germany from a downturn and restored its economy between 1933-34.

His work began to take an ominous turn by 1935 though. Hitler began the re-militarization of Germany and re-armed the country once again. Clearly, he had violated the Treaty of Versailles, but as the Allies, took no action, Hitler was emboldened to move forward with his master plan, the restoration of Germany as a military power, and his quest for world domination.<sup>3</sup>

So began a territorial expansion, that by 1938 suggested, there was a very real possibility of war.<sup>4</sup> Austria was annexed that year, followed by Hitler's ambitions for expansion in the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia. War was clearly evident that late summer and fall.

There was some respite though. A pact was reached with Hitler designed to resolve what came to be "the Munich Crisis". World leaders looked forward to peace in our time in their acquiesces and appeasement to all of Hitler's demands. Then came Poland's turn 3 September 1939, and with that invasion, the Second World War began.<sup>5</sup>

The coming of the Second World War was anticipated. Behind the scenes the Canadian government took some preliminary steps for the nation's defence. These steps reached far back, and down into many local communities. There was envisioned a growing need for manpower.

Less than 20 years after Laurier Grant's release from the 85th Nova Scotia Highlanders (Pictou Highlander's), he was called by its commanding officer to raise a reserve army company in one eastern county of Nova Scotia, known as Guysborough County.

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<sup>3</sup> John Keegan, **The Second World War**, Penguin Books, 1989, pg. 34-36

<sup>4</sup> William L. Shirer, **The Nightmare Years -1930-1940, A Memoir Of A Life And The Times**, Little, Brown, and Company . Boston . Toronto ., 1984, pg. 254-326

<sup>5</sup> William L. Shirer, **The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich – A History of Nazi Germany**, A Touchstone Book published by Simon & Shuster Inc., New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, 1959, pg. 455-512

Laurier Grant was commissioned in the rank of second lieutenant as officer commanding E company, but by war's end had been promoted Major for his distinguished service. In the beginning though, he had no soldiers to command.

Laurier's first task was to recruit and prepare platoon commanders and key non-commissioned officers for the company. He soon began enlisting troops, some of whom had experience as World War One veterans. Eventually, Laurier raised 3 platoons of Pictou Highlander's, that were stationed in Guysborough, with one platoon at Canso, and another at Isaac's Harbour, totalling over 300 men.

Men received regular training conducted largely in the evenings and on weekends. A summer army camp was also held. Their training was large in scope and far beyond boot bashing on the parade square.

All the officers of the company received an education and wrote regular army examinations for promotion. These exams were usually held at the Pictou Highlander's Barracks in New Glasgow. Many of the young men who joined and trained in Guysborough served in the active force on reaching the age of 18 and gave distinguished service overseas.<sup>6</sup>

At least half of the first troops serving in the Canso Defence Area in the fall of 1939, were residents of Guysborough County, as they had been recruited and trained there. The story of how they were brought together, was the story of war on the Homefront in Canada.

That story is neither self-evident nor apparent on the surface. It unfolded as the war unfolded, was influenced by events on the world stage, and change that precipitated action on the home front. Such was the case in the Canso Defence Area too. And so, the story unfolds, August 1939.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid Laurier C. Grant, 1987, pg. 70-71

## Introduction

The Historic Commercial Cable Building at Hazel Hill, Nova Scotia was demolished over the summer of 2017, despite all efforts taken over 10 years, to save it from destruction. The Commercial Cable Rehabilitation Society tried their very best to save and restore a historic building. But they were unable to do so in the end. Truly it was sad to see its loss, not because it is a remarkable building, but for what it represented, a period in our history.

The Commercial Cable station constructed in 1888, was at the forefront of a communications revolution in its day. Hazel Hill was one of the largest cable relay stations in the world, housing some of the most technologically advanced equipment available. Nine thousand miles of cable carried news of world events and communications through this junction at Hazel Hill, between Europe and North America, faster than any other means. Its very existence was a vital communication link.<sup>7</sup>



Nova Scotia Public Archives, 2017 – Commercial Cable Company  
Hazel Hill, NS

Hazel Hill station was closed in 1962. Bit by bit, Guysborough County and many other rural communities are losing what amounts to large pieces of their heritage, because of a rapid state of decline, and a lack of resources to sustain them.

The reasons vary, but truly, much is due in large measure, to the parsimony of economic opportunity, and the failure of government to invest in rural communities, that is at the heart of the matter. We see that constantly reflected in the conditions of our roads and in the sad state of rural services and infrastructure in Guysborough County alone.

Guysborough County's fate is one marked by this trend as well as the continued out-migration of our young people to economic opportunities elsewhere. Their hopes for a future in raising a family and a living wage should be here, but they

<sup>7</sup> Helen Murphy, **Commercial Cable Building soon to be demolished**, Guysborough Journal, 12 Jul 2017, Pg. 1 & 3

now lie elsewhere as evidence in declining school enrolments, business closures or contractions. Add to that we see it in the loss of public infrastructure such as; post offices, or general stores. It is a sad state of affairs because the population no longer exists to viably support them. It wasn't always so.

Much was lost with the demolition of the Commercial Cable station. With it went a part of Guysborough County's remarkable history. Hazel Hill was once an important asset; not only to Guysborough County, but to Canada. It had to be willingly protected from harm or destruction. It now suffered a familiar fate faced in many other Nova Scotia rural communities.

Guysborough, Cape Breton, and elsewhere were once important both strategically and economically to Canada. There is evidence of that in the measures taken here during the Second World War. It all happened here, one idyllic summer in 1939.

## 1 - Idyllic Summer

War loomed on the horizon in 1939. In the spring and summer of that year, Canada and the world only hoped for the best, yet feared the worst. Still there were some bright spots that summer. One welcome diversion from the inevitable was the Royal Visit to Canada of their majesty's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the Queen mother). Their storied visit occurred between 17 May and 15 June.

The Royals arrived in Canada that May to much fanfare, receiving warm welcomes wherever they travelled. The Royal Visit was a whirlwind tour with a side trip to the United States. By 15 June the Royals made final stops in Nova Scotia at Pictou



Gerry Madigan Archives – Chisholm-MacKeen Family Souvenir Royal Tour Spoon 1939

where they travelled by rail from New Glasgow to Antigonish. Their visit soon ended thereafter. They sailed from Halifax and less than three months later, Canada and the world were at war.<sup>8</sup>

It didn't seem so though on August 30, which was a typical summer day in the Strait of Canso area. It was a balmy 27C. It had not rained in days. But there was uncommon activity there.

## The Pictou Highlanders Arrive

<sup>8</sup> Peggy Feltmate, *White Head Harbour, Guysborough County, NS - Its Stories, History and Families*, Toronto Canada, 2011 (fourth printing 2017), pg. 99

On 30 August 1939, lead elements of the Pictou Highlanders arrived in Guysborough County. It was the beginning of a coming wave of military personnel to the county. Many military personnel of all Canada's Armed Services would descend upon the Canso Strait Area and the eastern shore, most notably at Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury. The first elements in the strait area were led by Lt Col S. MCK. Fraser, the designated Officer Commanding, Strait of Canso Defences.



Nova Scotia Public Archives, 2017 – Pictou Highlanders  
Aldershot, NS June 1939

The Strait of Canso, including Cape Breton, was considered a vital area. Cape Breton was indeed an island in those days. The Port at Sydney with its industries and products were of strategic importance, not only for convoys that supported Britain overseas, but also to Canadian industry inland.

The Strait of Canso was a gateway for products coming to and from Cape Breton, on the railway ferry between Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury. This key link had to be protected to ensure the free flow of goods and services, vital to Canada's materiel needs during the war. Everything flowed through the Strait to the industrial heartland to build the weapons of war.

In the coming days of early September, Lt Col Fraser's time was totally devoted to the protection and defence of this vital area. His first step was to lay out his defence and dispositions. Next, he was to find lodging and shelter to accommodate his growing force. Finally, he was tasked with training for the area's defence. Lt Col Fraser's task was monumental, but his key difficulty would soon prove to be accommodations!

Lead elements of the Pictou Highlanders occupied quarters at Hazel Hill NS. The Highlanders rented some space from the Commercial Cable Company to house a

total of 25 men who would eventually be billeted there for local defence. This was roughly a platoon strength of men.<sup>9</sup>

It was odd that a military unit was stationed there, for after all, Canada was still at peace. War was only declared 10 September 1939. That was still some days away. And war was never ever a certainty. There was always hope for peace despite the shades of disaster looming visibly on the horizon.

Winston Churchill in “The Gathering Storm” warned of the impending dangers. His persistent warnings, amongst others, were disparaged. They were cast aside many times over in the court of public opinion. He was considered a war monger, so his warnings were largely ignored or discounted by world leaders until later proven in action, word and deed that autumn.

The public always held a vain hope for peace, that war could be avoided, and that any impending disaster could be averted at all costs, even through appeasement. Peace was the option truly desired. It was paid in kind through a treaty that ostensibly guaranteed peace in our time. But in the end, war was only delayed, it was the inevitable, and was the expected reality.

Hitler eventually attacked Poland on 1 September. Two short days later, Great Britain and France were at war with Germany. Behind the scenes, Canada made vain last diplomatic efforts. The Canadian government cabled peace appeals to Germany, Italy and Poland 26 August 1939.<sup>10</sup> Mackenzie King’s diplomatic efforts had no effect. What was to be, came to be.

Mackenzie King’s government took steps beyond this failed diplomatic effort. Amongst the dispatched telegrams that possibly passed through the Commercial Cable Company, were likely those commencing Canada’s mobilization of its Armed Forces and notices to diplomatic stations.

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<sup>9</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, **S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940**, Initial Dispositions and Accommodations worked out by 25 Sep 1939, Pg. 4/97

<sup>10</sup> A.R. Byers (ed) et al. **The Canadians at War 1939.45 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.**, Reader’s Digest Assoc., 1986, pg. 12



Churchill's War Room – Chiefs of Staff Conference Room, Gerry Madigan's Archives – June 2014

The Pictou Highlanders commanded by Lt Col S. MCK. Fraser were called out on 26 August 1939. The Pictou Highlanders were subsequently tasked with local defence and protection duties. The unit was placed on active service on 1 September, some nine days before the government's actual declaration of war on 10

September.<sup>11</sup>

The government's move to invoke active service was indicative of how quickly the troops were mobilized and moved to protect key vital areas that included the Commercial Cable Company. It was a key and vital communication's link. And yet, it has often been observed that "Canada was unprepared for war".

The regular army of 4500 men, augmented by 51,000 partly trained reservists, possessed virtually no modern equipment. The air force had fewer than 20 modern combat aircraft; while the navy's combat potential, consisted of only six destroyers, the smallest class of ocean-going warships. It was a modest beginning.<sup>12</sup>

What is significant in the above, concerns Canada's reservists. It was remarkable that Canada's 51000 partly trained reservists, were amongst the first to be mobilized and moved quickly to fill the gaps in our local defences.

<sup>11</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, **THE NOVA SCOTIA HIGHLANDERS**, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, publication A-DH-267-000/AF-003, pg. 6/9 (2-2-166)

<sup>12</sup> Canadian War Museum:

Source: [http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931goes\\_to\\_e.shtml](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931goes_to_e.shtml)

Accessed: 27 Sep 2016

Lt Col Fraser's actions in the aftermath of his government's declaration of active service, was indicative of the readiness of the reserves to mobilize for that duty. First, and above all, was the quality of the staff work, some of which must have been ongoing in the background. There were probably warning orders, movement orders, and reconnaissance conducted in anticipation of Canada's coming war footing.

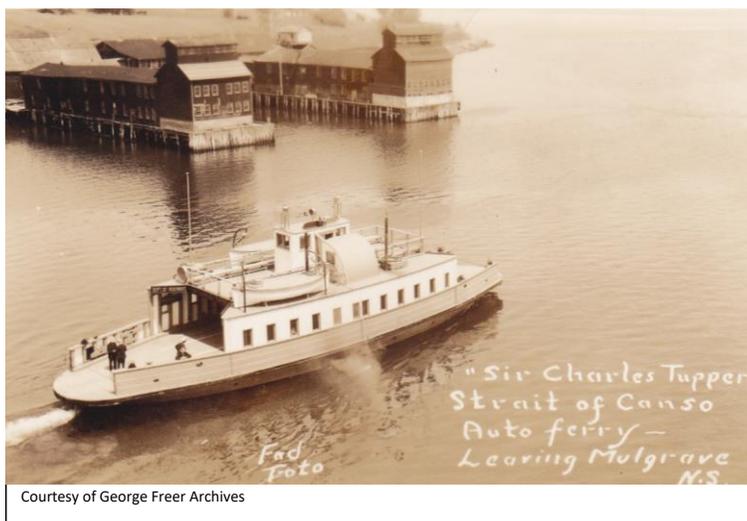
The Highlander's had need for accommodation, winter was only a few short months away. The earliest letters of 11 September requesting accommodations acquisition and approvals, points to Lt Col Fraser's outstanding staff work and leadership. His forethought of planning and proactive approach anticipated the many needs of his command. He ensured his men were housed under hard accommodations before the winter snow fell. Failure otherwise meant the Highlanders would have been left out in the cold and under canvas that year.

Canada's partly trained reservists did particularly well, given the circumstances. They reacted quickly, asked relevant questions, and took appropriate actions, so it would seem then that the blanket statement that Canada was totally unprepared for war, was not necessarily correct. Canada's reserve leadership was indeed intellectually prepared and ready to take on the task at hand. Canada, as a nation, simply failed to adequately provide the necessary budgets or tools in anticipation of the coming war. And so, an idyllic summer ended, and war began.

## 2 - Baby Steps

Cape Breton was truly an island in 1939, separated from the mainland by the Strait of Canso. The building of a causeway eventually linked an island to the mainland, but it did not exist then. The Canso Causeway was only built long after the war had ended, then still a distant future.

The port at Sydney, its industries, and its products were of strategic importance to Canada's war effort. The gateway to Cape Breton then, was a railway ferry between Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury upon which goods traversed the Strait. It had to be protected.



Courtesy of George Freer Archives

In the coming days of late August and early September 1939, the first task for the Pictou Highlanders was finding shelter.

The Highlanders found that "accommodations" were few and far between. What was available was often substandard. Lt Col Fraser wanted to lease what was known as the "Irish Facilities" for use as an Officer's Mess on 11 Sep 1939, one short day after war was declared. His request was considered and denied as higher authorities designated this facility for use as a hospital.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for

Lt Col Fraser worked out all his initial dispositions by 15 September. His was a far-reaching defence area that not only included Mulgrave but areas as far as St Peters as well. As Officer Commanding (OC) Strait of Canso Defence, Lt Col Fraser was responsible for the disposition of 562 souls that initially included elements of 86th Bty. R.C.A. His command would grow as an even greater number of men and materiel was anticipated.<sup>14</sup>

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**Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Correspondence on file: 1,**  
Accommodation Arrangements for Pictou Highlanders, H.200- -4 15 Sep 1939, pg. 2/ 97

<sup>14</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, 25 Sep 1939. Pg. 4/97 Initial Dispositions and Accommodations

Table 1 – Initial dispositions 15 September 1939

Part 1 Unit Strength			
Unit			15-Sep-39
The Pictou Highlanders			487
86th Heavy Battery R.C.A.			48
Attached 86th Hvy. Ety. R.C.A.			
5th Fortress Signals			
1st Fortress Coy., R.C.A.S.C			
21st Field Ambulance			
Military Hospital			
Princess Louise Fusailiers /N.NS (MG)/other Units			27
3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy.			
Canadian Dental Corp.			
Total Str:			562

Source: Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, pg. 4/97;

Military units were widely scattered in and around the Strait area, but the majority were concentrated at Mulgrave with the Pictou Highlanders (387), with lesser detachments of men, posted from Hazelhill on the mainland; to Point Tupper, St Peter's Canal, Ottawa Brook, and Grand Narrows on Cape Breton Island. The field batteries were located at Beacon and Melford. The N.N.S Highlanders (MG) were located at Point Tupper. All were in place by 15 September.

Once those initial dispositions were worked out, Lt Col Fraser was able to adjust them as necessary. Lt Col Fraser was now free to devote a considerable portion of his time to properly accommodating his men. It was September and winter was only a short time away. It was very likely his primary task at this stage of the game. Given the anticipation of winter cold and storms, it was warmth and dry shelter for his men that was the defining need.

The problems facing Lt Col Fraser were availability and lack of suitable local accommodation. This was especially true in the out lying areas. He found that the state of available accommodations was substandard, but that was only what was immediately available.

The needs of the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA were particularly urgent. Their problem was solved in the short term. Canvas was drawn from stores at Antigonish for their immediate needs, and then huts were erected in due course.<sup>15</sup> Canvas was only to be a temporary expedient though.

Lt Col Fraser's problems extended far beyond housing, victualling and feeding. His was also the problem of a greater health issue. The mass of men was virtually unwashed, and there were few facilities to accommodate those needs.

Getting the men adequately accommodated and under cover that coming winter would prove to be challenging. It also meant that there was little time to train or even move the markers required by the training syllabus. All these problems placed considerable strain and burden on Lt Col Fraser's shoulders.<sup>16</sup>

Lt Col Fraser contended with many problems in the start up at Mulgrave and the Strait Area. But his biggest hurdle to resolving anything proved to be the bureaucratic muddle!

Lt Col Fraser's odyssey ground on relentlessly day by day. But all was finally in place by 11 March 1940. All outstanding contracts necessary to house, accommodate, victual and clean were finally approved!<sup>17</sup> It proved to be a very gruelling slog as most accommodations were substandard or were poorly insulated. There was much to do to bring them up to par, making them functional as well as making them safe and comfortable for the troops to live in.

It didn't help that Lt Col Fraser was harried and questioned relentlessly along the way concerning the exorbitant costs. He was constantly harassed by bureaucratic queries and demands for explanation why he was leasing such poor habitation. Really, Fraser had little choice but to do so. There was little else there in 1939, and winter made it imperative, that his men were sheltered under cover, however poorly.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Major Clark Accommodation Issues, 22 Sep 1939, pg. 6/97

<sup>16</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Personal letter from Lt Col Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine, pg. 30-32/97

<sup>17</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, 11 Mar 1940 DND letter to MD 6 – Contract on St Andrews Hall – covering letter – nothing else on file relating to initial contracts, pg. 97/97,

Fraser's situation was eased considerably only when he was given local authority to lease on a case by case basis with approvals from his higher headquarters. They would simply sort out the details in what later was the penultimate battle of the "Bureaucratic Muddle"! <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, – Letter DND Ottawa to MD 6 approved repairs on Irving properties, pg43/97.

### 3 - Growing Pains

September 1939 saw the culmination of great activity for Canada, who had set in motion preparations for the defence of the country. But those preparations truly began in earnest that August. At that time the Pictou Highlanders were pressed into active service. In truth, the government mobilized all of its reserve units the same day, 26 August.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the first mobilized were its artillery reserve units.

There were too few artillery units and far too many vital areas to protect. Regardless of the difficulties, it was concluded that three vital areas had to be immediately protected on Canada's east coast; two in Nova Scotia at Halifax and Sydney, and the other, at St John's New Brunswick.

Halifax was a key strategic location, considered second in importance to Liverpool, UK because of its location, refineries, docks and troop embarkation points. It was also the location of vital stores held at the joint services magazine as well as an airport at Dartmouth.

Sydney was vital for several other reasons. First, Sydney held a commanding position along the Cabot Strait that dominated the Gulf of St Lawrence. It was also an important anchorage that could hold 75 ships. Most importantly, it was home to 50% of Canada's steel production. So, Sydney indeed was a key and vital area to the defence of Canada.

Finally, and less exposed, was St John, NB. It too was important as an industrial area. Its strategic location and position also greatly assisted the RCN over the course of the war. St John was favoured because of its dry dock facilities and, more importantly, as an ocean terminal, that was well protected deep inside the Bay of Fundy. St John's facilities proved to be of great strategic importance to the war effort.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A.R. Byers (ed) et al. **The Canadians at War 1939.45 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.**, Reader's Digest Assoc., 1986, pg. 12

<sup>20</sup> Canada, National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History and Heritage Ottawa, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, (declassified 16 October 1986), original authored by G WL Nicholson, Maj, 19 Feb 1945, 86 pg.

Source: <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/ahqr-rqga-eng.asp>

[Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast](#), 19 Feb 1945, Report 4,

Accessed: 15 November 2017, pg. 5/86 para 23-25

Two threats were apparent for these vital areas. First, there was the physical threat of sabotage by the enemy, enemy aliens, or fifth column forces. The other threat emanated from the amassed potential of enemy forces either by air or by sea.

The Atlantic essentially was a large ditch, effectively obstructing the direct assault by land forces. Such an attack would require a considerable effort and coordination with naval forces by the enemy in any case. That threat was highly improbable. But striking threats and feints were indeed feasible. So, control of our vital approaches was critical. This required the mobilization of all Canadian Forces; land, sea, and air. It all looked good on paper, but it was a question of means to do so. The distribution of Anti-Aircraft (AA) artillery is a case in point.

Halifax was amongst the first to see AA batteries deployed. Canada's limited AA resources were distributed equally amongst the important ports of Halifax, NS, Sydney, NS and St John NB.

AA defence stood up in Halifax August 1939. The initial detachment was augmented by 4 AA Battery (BTY) (Permanent Force) who arrived from Kingston, Ontario on 28 August, with modern equipment.

Four 3-inch 20cwt guns were placed in action on the east side of Halifax Harbour; distributed as two guns at Imperial Oil, and two at Burnside. The fire control system was obsolete, a Vicker's Predictor Mark VII with ring site telescope. Predictors were distributed one to each gun-site. The Commanding Officer (CO) was Col C.S. Craig. He would later leave the unit to become the overall Commander of "Halifax Fortress".<sup>21</sup>

The problems of the smaller areas were not forgotten. AA defence requirements were considered for both the Strait of Canso and St John NB as early as 1939. But no such armament was available for either that September. The priorities lay elsewhere for the moment. A demand remained on the books, but at AA guns were never placed in the Canso Area during the war.<sup>22</sup>

A report written in 1942 outlined the placement and positions of AA batteries in eastern Canada. A need for such batteries was recognized, but neither Mulgrave

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, *The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast*, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 6/86 para 26-27

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, *The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast*, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 10/86 para 31

nor Port Hawkesbury in the Strait of Canso Defence Area, were ever listed in the requirement (Figure 1).<sup>23</sup>

Figure 1 – Listing of AA Gun Placements 1942

heavy (3.7") and light (40 mm Bofors) AA guns (59):

	3.7"	40 mm
Halifax	28	16
Sydney	20	8
Saint John NB	8	4
Shelburne	4	4
Gaspe	4	4
Arvida	12 (incl. 4, 3")	16
St. John's-Torbay	16 (incl. 4 US. manned 3")	8
Bell Island	-	2
Botwood	4	4
Lewisporte	4	4
Gander	8	8
Goose Bay	4	4

The arrangement of equipment and scales of establishment remained an undue strain and of great concern to many. The key consideration concerned the ongoing protection of key and vital points. The initial years of the war were challenging enough.

Nineteen thirty-nine to 1942 was a dark period for the soldier manning the guns. It was a time of continuous watch keeping and anticipation in the waiting for an enemy attack that might develop at any moment. In other words, for the troops it was concurrently intense and boring.

For those higher up in the chain of command, it was a time of worry. Were the preparations and adjustments already taken, enough? Only a test by the enemy would reveal the outcome. Regardless, their preparations were a case of making do with what was available, and waiting for Canada's industrial capacity to catch up to produce in quantity, the tools required. Was it all up to scratch?

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, *The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast*, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 12/86 para 39

For Atlantic Canada, preparation meant a state of continual planning under constantly changing conditions. This was necessary to achieve the most effective employment of any new armament as soon as it arrived.

Planning required a constant review to balance the scale of resources commensurate to the threat that often changed. This meant that manning and formations of batteries were under constant pressure. There was also a bill to be paid in the training and movement of personnel that went along with it.<sup>24</sup>

Additional training for Coastal Defence and AA batteries was considered for Military Districts (MD) 6 & 7 in October 1940. Again, it all hinged on what was immediately available and at hand, commensurate with the changing threat, and other geographical /strategic considerations.

Training was initiated by MGen Elkins of MD 6. He wanted to bring his new and existing units up to war establishment with an increase of 25% in manning alone in MD 6, with an additional 15% increase in manning to MD 7.

MGen Elkins made such recommendations to National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), Ottawa in which he specifically identified, 16 Coast Bde and 86 Heavy Bty, RCA, both based either at Sydney or in Canso. He mentioned that the range of duties conducted by these units should include the tasks of coastal defence, AA battery, and examination batteries. Coast Defence and examination services were tasks already employed at Canso.<sup>25</sup>

The Canso Defence Area would not receive any of the newly manufactured 40mm Bofors AA guns. These guns were dispersed elsewhere. It was assumed that they were most urgently and strategically required beyond the Canso Defence Area (figure 1). It must also be assumed that an assessment of air attack in the Canso area was unlikely.<sup>26</sup>

The scale of war time establishments provides some insight into the state of Canada's preparedness. It was only in 1942 that some key vital areas were finally augmented by new manning and scales of equipment. The problem was not for

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 11/86 para 37

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. Pg. 14/86 para 42.- 44 (manning and training)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg.14-19 para 42-54

the lack of manpower. There was plenty of that. The problem lay in the lack of pre-war preparation and defence spending that was further limited in war by necessity, production, and priorities.

The greater part of Canada's materiel output was exported to the United Kingdom whose needs were considered most vital. There was a constant demand for replacement or augmentation. It was not surprising, given that the United Kingdom was in direct contact with the enemy, losses were incurred that had to be replaced. This situation reversed itself though in 1942. Once war was declared on Japan, the uninhibited industrial capacity of the United States was soon added to the fray, that wiped out materiel deficits in time.

Surprisingly, there was a severe shortage of trained personnel to man equipment despite the increased industrial output. Surprisingly some equipment remained in Depots because of this lack of trained personnel and the pressures that new establishments placed on manpower.<sup>27</sup>

Until that time in the war, the Canadian Homefront was of secondary importance. But by 1942, the scale of production was ahead of the UK's demand, meaning that new Canadian establishments could be trained to fill the vital AA needs along Canada's East Coast, assuming that personnel were available in quantity to do so.<sup>28</sup> But by that time, it was too late! Home units were now drafted for duties and active service in the build up of the Canadian Army overseas. These drafts exacerbated demands on our manpower and replacement pool, that created manning shortfalls.

Even though there was always hope that others in Atlantic Canada would receive Bofors guns once production hit its stride, only Cape Breton saw any augmentation of 40MM Bofors Guns. An additional 8 guns were eventually allocated to Sydney.

These guns were there to protect the Naval installation at Point Edward and the RCAF Seaplane Base at North Sydney. Each of these installations was allocated

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 54-62

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 18/86 para 53

two guns each. The bulk of the guns were sited at the Sydney Steel Works who, surprisingly, received an additional 8 guns.<sup>29</sup>

Neither Mulgrave nor Port Hawkesbury received any allocation of AA guns. It was most surprising that they were overlooked. There were vital assets in the crossing of the Strait as a key rail junction. Goods and services flowed between Cape Breton and the mainland on the railway ferry. It was the Achilles heel of the whole production system. This was the area where the ferry service transported rail cars over the Strait of Canso. It was an exposed target. The aerial threat must have been rated very low, but it still had to be protected.



Courtesy of George Freer Archives

But sorting out the number and types of guns, and their allocations and dispositions, was a simple matter in the grand scheme of things. It was nothing compared to their command and control.

Command arrangements in the Canso Defence Area were assigned to Lt Col Fraser, who was appointed "Officer Commanding" the OC Canso Strait Defence

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, *The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast*, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 19/86 para 54

(Note the math in official records does quite add up. It suggests that 12 additional guns were ultimately allocated in Cape Breton. I'm holding to the record as is though).

Area. Lt Col Fraser was immediately responsible to guard against the opportunity of enemy attack.

Lt Col Fraser was also the Commanding Officer (CO) Pictou Highlanders, but his command also included the 86<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery R.C.A, and N.N.S Highlanders (MG). He was further assisted with the assets of a Military Hospital, No. 5 Fortress Signals, No. 1 Fortress Coy. RCASC, 3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy., and P.L. Fusiliers to bolster his resources.<sup>30</sup>

86 Heavy Bty, RCA was a subordinate unit in the order of battle of the Commander Canso Defence Area. It all sounded simple on paper, but it was never that simple. 86 Heavy Bty, RCA was an independent unit to a great degree. The commanding officer Canso Defence area was responsible for its administration, care and maintenance through the provision of logistics support. But he had little direction on its operational control or employment. Operational control rested with the Gun Operational Room (G.O.R.) at Sydney, where 86 Heavy Bty was under command of the H.Q. A.A. Regt.<sup>31</sup>

It went a little further than that. The CO Canso Defence area had little responsibility or command control even over routine matters within this unit. 86 Heavy Bty, RCA was responsible for its own maintenance, equipment, discipline, pay, leave and furlough when it came to its men. The unit was nominally under control of the OC Canso Defence Area in the normal chain of command, as part of a Defended or Port Area. But 86 Heavy Bty was truly independent though, when it came to regimental matters, which came under regimental command and control.

It was all a complicated matter. But there was a general agreement that the Detachment Commander 86 Heavy BTY would be the liaison between Regimental HQ at Sydney and the OC Canso Defence Area. As such, the Battery Commander would be responsible for all artillery matters, and act as the in-between for the Regimental Commander and the Commander of the Fortress. The many responsibilities of a Commanding Officer of a Defended Port or Area were

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<sup>30</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 321.009 (D373), **Situation Reports Aug to Sep 1940**, 27 Aug 1940, pg. 2/13

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 26/86 para. 66 (ii-iii)

generally so numerous and onerous, that he likely was quite willing to allow the specialist gunner to run his own show.<sup>32</sup>

Despite all the difficulties 86 Heavy Bty, RCA was an integral component of the Canso Defence Area. But the complicated command arrangements added strain and hardship to the command of Lt Col Fraser of the Pictou Highlanders by the ongoing need for resolution of chain of command issues.

Regardless, all units were kept under a training regime, that was interspersed into the chatter and hub-hub of regular duty. All were kept at a high state of readiness, for local protection. They all honed their skills and kept sharp while waiting for the worst.<sup>33</sup> It was not without action!

The 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA, the artillery unit responsible for the protection of the Strait, maintained a constant state of vigilance and readiness to act immediately. Their arcs of fire protected both ends of the Strait of Canso, at the entrances - North to Georges Bay; and South – to Chedabucto Bay. But their prime function was to challenge and identify unknown vessels in the protection of the Strait.<sup>34</sup> That happened in time.

An American Yacht named “Drift” caused quite a stir 4 September 1940. “Drift” was becalmed in the Strait. More importantly, it failed to answer a challenge. It was subsequently fired upon by the shore battery to get its attention.

The first shot over its bow was dead weight, contained no high explosive, and was only meant to draw “Drift’s” attention. The Drift missed a signal challenge, but it was finally determined that the crew “did not know that they had wandered into a guarded restricted area.”

They were simply attempting to anchor and had not heard the challenge. The incident was investigated, and the situation was resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. No harm or damage was done, and everything was cleared up amicably.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, **The Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Atlantic Coast**, 19 Feb 1945, pg. 26/86 para. 66 (iii)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 4/13

<sup>34</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 1-13/13

<sup>35</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg.8-9/13

Table 1 - Parade States

Part 1 Unit Strength						
Unit	15-Sep-39	pg 4/13 27-Aug-40	pg 8/13 01-Sep-40	pg11/13 11-Sep-40		
The Pictou Highlanders	487	666	667	665		2%
86th Heavy Battery R.C.A.	48	151	149	149		3%
Attached 86th Hvy. Ety. R.C.A.		6	5	5		
5th Fortress Signals		19	19	18		
1st Fortress Coy., R.C.A.S.C		11	10	10		
21st Field Ambulance		1	1	1		
Military Hospital		13	13	13		15%
Princess Louise Fusaiiliers /N.NS (MG)/other Units	27	32	32	32		
3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy.		11	10	12		
Canadian Dental Corp.		3	3	3		
Total Str:	562	913	909	908		

Source: Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Correspondence on file: 1, Accommodation Arrangements for Pictou Highlanders, H.200- -4 15 Sep 1939, pg. 4/97; and

Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pages as noted above Pg. 4/13, pg. 81.3 and pg11/13

Lt Col Fraser’s command almost doubled in number over the year the Highlanders were in the Strait area. His command grew in strength from 562 in 1939 to 913 by 27 Aug 1940. The number of units that he was now responsible for administering also grew from 3 to 10. This growth added to his headaches and eventually, his administrative burdens.

Fraser was reliant on all for cooperation and support. He had to compile reports and returns to explain all areas of his command responsibility including those “nominal” units. He also required overall operational oversight, particularly in the areas of discipline and health within his area.<sup>36</sup> It was his signature that was affixed in all correspondence relating to these matters. He was in fact, de facto – the top dog!

Apart from the artillery units, Lt Col Fraser’s command included three front line operational units including the Pictou Highlanders, his own command. The Highlander’s, an infantry unit were naturally employed in defensive and offensive roles. The Highlanders were also the ready reserve, that is, ready to rush to the needs of other units should the call come.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 1-13/13

The final operational unit was the Princess Louise Fusiliers. This unit was a heavy and light machine gun unit that had a key supporting role. Their fixed positions had arcs of fire that protected the vital approaches and facilities on both sides of the Strait of Canso. In a pinch they could be employed in the AA role as well.

People machines and facilities tend to break down and require repair. So, operational units required the support of non-operational units to assist them to maintain peak efficiency. The units tasked with that function were the Military Hospital, 21 Field Ambulance, No. 5 Fortress Signals, No. 1 Fortress Coy RCASC, and 3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy. The function of military hospitals, field ambulance and signals units are obvious, less obvious though, are the functions of No. 1 Fortress Coy RCASC and 3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy.

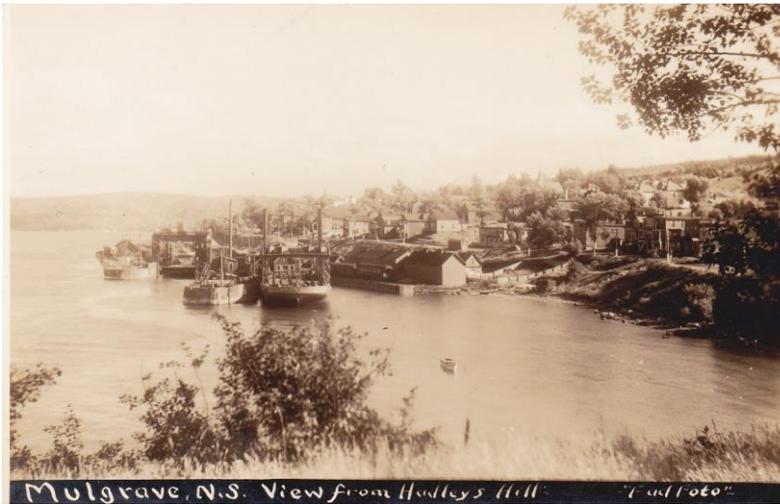
The Royal Canadian Army Service Corps was responsible for the provision of logistic support to units in the field. This support included victualling, supply and transport. There were 11 members in No. 1 Fortress Coy. RCASC tasked at Mulgrave. They not only supported the Canso Defence Area, but also other military units, most notably No 5 Radar Unit (RCAF) at Cole Harbour.

3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy was a unit responsible for engineering support for the needs of all in the area. Engineering support included both electrical and mechanical needs of the units concerned.

These were the initial dispositions in the Canso Defence Area. They grew over time. It all had to be managed and directed, it was a task that weighed heavily on Lt Col Fraser's shoulders. In fact, his was the unexpected battle in the Canso Defence Area, "the battle of bureaucracy!"

#### 4 - Danger Abounds Everywhere (1939-1941)

The Strait of Canso, a key strategic gateway, led all onto or off the island of Cape Breton. Everything passed through there on the railway ferry between Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury.



Courtesy of George Freer Archives

But the Strait was important in other ways. The Strait was also an open gateway to marine traffic through which Canadian National Steamships and other marine interests passed on their way to the Caribbean, American ports or travels south.

Five ships, "The Lady Boats", were designed and built for the Canadian National Steamship (CNS) line in the 1920s. Some of the Lady Ships carried cargo and passengers through the Strait on their way south to the Caribbean. They were the pleasure cruisers of the day outfitted with great opulence to attract paying passengers. But it would always be a tough go for them, as the ships were built and put into service just as the Great Depression hit Canada.

There were two lines for the fleet for the provision of service to the West Indies. The western line made its home port at Montreal and the eastern line at Halifax. "Western" and "Eastern" do not mark the dispositions of the ships at their home

ports in Canada. They reflect a designation of the routes taken by the fleet through the Caribbean.

The western route departing from Montreal ventured down the St Lawrence and then turned in the Gulf toward the Strait of Canso. Their path took the boats through the Strait onto the broad Atlantic in their journey to the Caribbean.<sup>37</sup> These ships would have been familiar sights as they passed through the Strait of Canso whose passage is now limited by the Causeway and Canal.



SS Lady Rodney in St. John's, NF in May 1943. In peacetime, this ship sailed the Caribbean with 130 passengers and cargo, during the war she was converted to carry 500 soldiers. Photo taken from HMCS WASAGA. Roger Litwiller Collection, courtesy Ross Milligan, RCNR. (RTL-REM165)

All these assets had to be protected to ensure the free flow of goods and services either east and west or north and south as they were all vital to Canada during the war.

Luckily the enemy's activities in a nutshell until 1941, were largely confined to waters around the United Kingdom (UK). The U-boat threat around Canada's East coast thus seemed both manageable and contained. Canada's strategic situation was also helped by the United States. Their naval forces assisted us prior to 7 Dec 1941

through convoy protection off the Atlantic Coast. It was alleged that because of their intervention, the enemy was forced out of the western Atlantic for a time.

But that all changed after 7 December though. United States naval forces were either withdrawn or operations in the Atlantic scaled back. Their naval assets were required to bolster their decimated fleet in the Pacific following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, M.B.E., **The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada's West Indies Merchant Fleet**, Canadian Marine Transportation Centre, Dalhousie University, 1980, pg. 23

<sup>38</sup> Canada, National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History, AFHQ Report 30, **Army Participation In Measures Taken By The Three Services For The Security Of The Gulf Of St. Lawrence And The Lower River During The Period Of German Submarine Activity, 1942-45**, (original 18 Nov 1949), Ottawa, Canada

K1A OK2, July 1986, Pg4/20, para 2-4

It was after this point that Canada saw its first real direct and frequent incursions deep into Canadian waters. The situation was grave enough off the Atlantic coast, but it was made worse when U-boats attacked shipping in the Gulf of St Lawrence in 1942.

“It was inevitable that with enemy submarines continually present in American coastal waters, attacks would occur in the St. Lawrence, the broad waters of which led straight to the heart of Canada. For the moment there was little that could be done- of necessity the St. Lawrence traffic valuable though it was, had to take second place to the ocean convoys, and to the oil tankers in the Caribbean and along the American coast.”<sup>39</sup>

Canada’s military had not been idle in the meantime. Preparations were made as an attack in the Gulf was expected. But preparations were only about ways and means until circumstances forced a more immediate response when the enemy’s intentions and dispositions became clarified through action and intent.

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Source: <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/his/rep-rap/doc/ahqr-rqga/ahq030.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, Directorate of History, AFHQ Report 30, **Army Participation...**18 Nov 1949, pg. 4/20 para. 4



ocean-going ships in convoy through the St. Lawrence. Sydney and the anchorage at Bic Island, Qc became key convoy assembly points.<sup>40</sup>

The RCAF's reply to this threat saw aircraft dispatched to its stations at Mont Joli and Gaspé. They also commenced employing some of the aircraft from a station at North Sydney to sortie over the Gulf. Total aircraft involved in these activities varied throughout the 1942 shipping season.

The RCAF employed Bomber reconnaissance aircraft (Hudson Bombers) operating from Mont Joli, Qc., Chatham, N.B., and Sydney, NS. Besides these, two to four Canso flying boats operated out of Gaspé, with two to six out of North Sydney.<sup>41</sup>

Canada's partly trained reservists did particularly well in the circumstances too. They were already in place addressing the looming threat and had trained for this eventuality. For example, Lt Col Fraser in the Canso Defence Area had already worked out all his initial dispositions by 15 September 1939. Changes were made as circumstances and threats presented themselves or new assets became available. These units were not sitting idly by on their haunches or laurels.

Lt Col Fraser's responsibility spanned a far-reaching defence area that included Mulgrave and areas afar as St Peters in Cape Breton. Lt Col Fraser as Officer Commanding (OC) Strait of Canso Defence was responsible for the disposition of 562 personnel. That disposition initially included elements of 86th Bty. R.C.A. His command grew to an even greater number of men and materiel over time.<sup>42</sup>

His military units were widely scattered though. But the bulk of the Pictou Highlanders were largely concentrated in and around Mulgrave (387). The detachments of men spread far and wide, saw troops garrisoned from Hazelhill on the mainland to Point Tupper, St Peter's Canal, Ottawa Brook, and Grand Narrows

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, Directorate of History, AFHQ Report 30, **Army Participation...**18 Nov 1949, pg. 5/20 para. 5

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, Directorate of History, AFHQ Report 30, **Army Participation...**18 Nov 1949, pg. 4-5/20, para 4-6

<sup>42</sup>Source: Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Pg. 4/97 Initial Dispositions and Accommodations

on Cape Breton Island. It was the defensive layout required to protect vital points and infrastructure.

Field batteries of the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA) were located at Beacon and Melford. The North Nova Scotia (NNS) Highlanders (MG) machine gun company were located at point Tupper. The Melford battery guarded the Atlantic approaches at Chedabucto Bay. This was the more likely approach for German U-Boat Operations as it was an active navigable channel, frequently used by Canada's merchant shipping lines.

But the Beacon Battery was no less important. The Battery was first located at Auld's Cove and then subsequently moved to Havre Boucher! It seemed the less likely approach for U-boat operations and attack. But it was usually the less likely approach that was subject to attack given the military axiom for "surprise". There was a very real possibility that a U-boat might approach from this direction given the fact that U-boats sunk shipping deep in the St Lawrence River at Cap Chat near Mont Joli, QC in 1942 (see map).

However unlikely the probability, the approach was always considered a possibility that was not without great risk. On the downside of risk, a U-Boat commander would have had to enter the Gulf, round Cape Breton, attack, and then withdraw, in what was a very confined area, already targeted by Canada's army, naval, and air forces all along the way. It would have been harrowing, had it been attempted. But there had to be a willingness on the part of the enemy to accept the risk of what was seemingly impossible. The sinking of HMS Royal Oak at Scapa Flow in October 1939 though, proved that anything was possible, given the actions of a determined enemy.<sup>43</sup>

Lt Col Fraser and the Canso Defence Area were not alone in the task of defending the actions of a determined enemy. No 5 Radar Unit of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) at Cole Harbour, Guysborough County, Nova Scotia was one of the operational radar units on Canada's East Coast during the Second World War tasked to that end. It came to be in August 1942 and existed for three years to September 1945.

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<sup>43</sup> Snyder, Gerald S. **The Royal Oak Disaster**, Presidio Press, 1976, 240 pg.

No 5 Radar Unit (RCAF) was built on a site high on the barrens above Cole Harbour. The site was selected because it was 300 feet above sea level and gave a visual horizon of about 20 miles. The official description of No 5 RCAF Radar Squadron's location was given as "Tor Bay, approximately 125 miles east of Halifax".<sup>44</sup>

The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence was waged in the approaches and coastal areas of Canada in 1942. The enemy boldly entered these waters and torpedoed and sunk over 22 ships before it was all over. They were a cause for extreme concern and public safety as they threatened Canadian commerce and security.

Enemy submarines were considered a priority threat at the beginning of the Second World War. Canada was most fortunate that the German Navy was most unprepared for war at that point. It would be two years later when their activities climaxed as their U-boat force grew in number, that posed serious harm in the western Atlantic, and threatened us with defeat.

New bases were prepared and opened in the Maritimes and Newfoundland to deal with the enemy.<sup>45</sup> The radar detachments would be integral to those preparations, which heretofore were concentrated in Atlantic waters. But their entry into the Gulf was a game changer. The U-boat presence there suggested an urgency to get things done. One of those urgent measures was the institution of a radar chain.

There were 30 radar sites in the chain around Canada's east coast. They had different functions involving:

1. High Flying Early Warning Radar
2. Chain Home Low Flying Early Warning Radar
3. Ground Control Intercept Radar
4. Microwave Early Anti-Submarine, Surface Radar, and

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<sup>44</sup> WW McLachlan, **Royal Canadian Air Force Personnel on Radar in Canada During World War II**, Publisher WW McLachlan, 2003, pg. xx-10

<sup>45</sup> Hugh A. Halliday, **Eastern Air Command: Air Force, Part 14**, Legion Magazine, 1 March 2006

## 5. United States SCR270/271 Radar.

No 5 RCAF Radar Squadron was one station in the Chain Home low flying early warning radar system.<sup>46</sup> No 5 Radar Unit was ready, operational, and conducted a dutiful watch for both enemy and friendly aircraft, as well as for enemy submarines.

In addition to No 5 RCAF Radar Squadron, the Royal Canadian Navy also had a presence in the immediate area. A LORAN Station was built at Deming Island Guysborough County, near White Head, Nova Scotia.

By early 1941 the technical and scientific war took a different tone and tempo. Its secret assets had to be protected. Great Britain and its allies began to reap some of the benefits of science and technology. The British had been investigating and developing a pulse type navigational aid. That development was eventually shared with the US following their entry in the war at Pearl Harbour in December 1941.<sup>47</sup> Matters soon progressed very quickly, and LORAN was borne.

LORAN was the acronym used to describe “long range navigation”. It was a hyperbolic radio navigation system developed in the United States that had similarities to the UK's Gee system. The key difference was that it operated at lower frequencies that improved range up to 1,500 miles (2,400 km), with a greater degree of accuracy than GEE, measured in tens of miles. It was a boon for ship's navigating in convoys crossing the Atlantic Ocean, and for the needs of long-range patrol aircraft.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid McLachlan, pg. xx6-7

<sup>47</sup> Peggy Feltmate, **White Head Harbour – Guysborough County, Nova Scotia, Its Stories, History and Families**, Toronto, Canada, 2011 (4<sup>th</sup> printing 2017)

<sup>48</sup> Wikipedia, **this article is about LORAN. It is not to be confused with Loran-G.**, 29 December 2018, at 06:49 (UTC).

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LORAN>

Accessed: 29 Jan 2019

In March 1942 a plan was made to create a chain of stations along the Atlantic Coast of the US and Canada. Early that May, Canada agreed to be a part of the venture in the development of LORAN.<sup>49</sup>

LORAN was in its simplest terms, a navigational system and aid. In essence, these stations irradiated signals that were precisely synchronized. Ships and planes, equipped with LORAN receiving sets, could then follow the intersect of these signals and thus navigate by chart rather than by live communications. The advantage was that they could maintain radio silence and hide their presence from the enemy who listened actively for radio signals.<sup>50</sup>

The implementation of LORAN in Canada proceeded speedily. By June 1942, sites were tentatively selected respectively known as No 3 and No 4. No 3 was located at Baccaro in Shelburne and the other No 4, at Deming, White Head NS. The two stations built in Nova Scotia in 1942, became known as 'Baker' in Baccaro and 'Dog' on Deming Island, Guysborough County. They were slave stations, that worked in tandem with a master station, 'Sugar', at Nantucket (Massachusetts).

Deming, given the code name "Dog", whose construction began 27 Jun 1942, was completed 8 Aug, and operated immediately when the first arrivals occupied the facility. The station was officially transferred to Canadian Authority 1 Oct 1942. In the meantime, until that transfer, Canadian Personnel were trained to operate this facility.<sup>51</sup>

These were important assets that had to be protected lest they fall into enemy hands who may have had an interest in its secrets. There was at least one instance at Baccaro where personnel were alerted to the presence of a lurking U-Boat, half a mile offshore. The suspected presence caused quite a stir and an alert in the barracks. The personnel in question were WRENS, responsible for their own immediate defence!

Mary Own was an operator there. In her words "All the LORAN equipment was housed in the Quonset huts. The transmitter was located at the far end, the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid Feltmate, 2011

<sup>50</sup> Historica Canada, The Memory Project, **Veteran Stories: Mary Own, Navy**, 2019  
Source: <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/867:mary-owen/>  
Accessed: 30 Jan 2019

<sup>51</sup> Ibid Feltmate, 2011

scopes in the middle and at the other end was a large area with the stove and a receiver. Underneath the floor were the explosives. As well as the explosives, we had a Bren gun, a revolver, nine or ten rifles, plus several Sten guns. Our station was well-equipped to fend off the enemy. Our orders were, "Blow up the equipment and get going."<sup>52</sup>

The young ladies of the WRENS were responsible for their own initial defence. The unit of approximately 25 women, although very well armed, were considered expendable.<sup>53</sup> The important thing was to destroy the equipment lest it fall into enemy hands.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, there were items and assets of vital national interest within the bounds of the Canso Defence Area. These had to be supported and protected by the Officer Commanding the Canso Defence Area, one way and or another. His troops were the ready reserve. They would have had to come to the aid, do battle, and defend these vital assets within the boundaries of his area of responsibility. Danger abounded everywhere.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid Historica Canada, The Memory Project, Mary Owen, 2019

<sup>53</sup> Ibid Feltmate, 2011

<sup>54</sup> [Loran History web site](#). LORAN-A, 2019

Source: [http://jproc.ca/hyperbolic/loran\\_a.html](http://jproc.ca/hyperbolic/loran_a.html)

Accessed: 30 Jan 2019

## 5 - The Bureaucratic Muddle 1939 to 1940

The domain of Lt Col Fraser, commanding officer of the Pictou Highlanders, spanned far and wide. His area of responsibility included not only Mulgrave, but also places as far as St Peters, in Cape Breton, and out along the eastern shore of Guysborough County. It was a widely scattered command.

The bulk of the Pictou Highlanders were concentrated at Mulgrave (387). Detachments of men were despatched from Auld's Cove to Melford in the Strait Area; while others were sent to Hazel Hill on the Eastern Shore, and elsewhere on Cape Breton.

These dispositions though created an unexpected battle, the one against bureaucracy. It was a battle found in finding and procuring shelter, accommodations and defence works for those posted in the Strait of Canso area! The problem was a simple, yet a complicated one. There was little available accommodation, and what was available, was often derelict or unsuitable.

The big issue for Lt Col Fraser, in fact the key issue for many commanding officers in that first year of the war, was the total lack of serviceable and useful facilities. None were available. Added to the burden was the fact that there was a pressing need to get his men sheltered, fed and undercover before the coming of winter snows.

The Pictou Highlanders served on local defence duties in the Canso Defence Area until 31 Dec 1940. They were disbanded that day and then replaced by an incoming unit. The problem of space simply didn't go away because the Highlanders were posted to duties overseas, 1 January 1941. Over the course of their time in the "Area", Lt Col Fraser tried to move mountains to properly accommodate and shelter his charges. In fact, that task started the very day the unit entered the Strait area and, began immediately upon arrival.

One of Lt Col Fraser's first forays, was an attempt to contract a facility known as the "Irish Facilities." Fraser wanted to use this building as an Officer's Mess. He sent a letter on 11 September 1939, one short day after Canada's separate declaration of war, to arrange for its use as such. His request was briefly

considered and then denied by higher authorities who designated this facility for use as a hospital.<sup>55</sup> The word or needs of the man on the ground mattered little.

So, began Lt Col Fraser's struggle with a bureaucracy, that was many miles displaced from the scene, and was out of touch with the reality of his immediate and urgent requirements.

It was the problems of means that became the bane of Fraser's existence over the coming months. The problems of command, the stresses of leadership, and problems of proper equipment and accommodation for his men, had a dramatic impact on his health.<sup>56</sup>

Lt Col Fraser's health was greatly aggravated by problems while finding suitable and available local accommodation, especially in the out lying areas. The state of these were often substandard but regrettably, that was the only material immediately available and at hand.

The needs of the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA were particularly urgent too. Men showed up with no proper accommodation to shelter them. Their problem; and that of others, was solved in the short term. Canvas was drawn from stores at Antigonish for their immediate needs and huts eventually erected in due course.<sup>57</sup> But canvas was only to be a very short-term solution.

The staff of the Pictou Highlanders finally conducted a survey of availability and commenced lease negotiations to contract and occupy local facilities. But this became a bureaucratic hell. Facilities were identified, permissions sought,

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<sup>55</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, **S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Correspondence on file: 1, Accommodation Arrangements for Pictou Highlanders, H.200- -4 15 Sep 1939, pg. 2/ 97**

<sup>56</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, 17 Nov 1939, pg. 30-32/97 – personal letter from Lt Col Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine

<sup>57</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Major Clark Accommodation Issues, 22 Sep 1939, pg. 6/97

questions asked by higher headquarters, responses made in reply, paperwork fiddled, diddled and lost, and frustration and indecision reigned supreme!

For the most part, the Pictou Highlander's hands were tied. They had very little authority either to procure or arrange locally at this time. They were advised that it was the responsibility of the Quartermaster General in Ottawa to coordinate all necessary arrangements. Further all leased arrangements were to be directed through them; thence onto Public Works for consideration.

The Army bureaucracy was bad enough. It was only made worse with the insertion of another government department in the process! All that involved another layer of staff and paperwork. In the meantime, winter was fast approaching. There was a very real possibility that the men would suffer as bureaucratic inertia settled in and procurement ground to a halt.<sup>58</sup>

Still several properties were identified that warranted further scrutiny. The unit identified in a telegram on 12 October 1939 the following facilities would greatly assist their immediate requirements:<sup>59</sup>

1. W.N. Meagher Garage - \$12.00/mo.
2. Two former Irving Oil stations \$5.00/mo. each
3. Hillcrest Hotel \$20.00/mo.
4. N. Manseur House \$20.00/mo.
5. N.V. MacLean House (Port) Hawkesbury -\$75.00/month.

The N.V. MacLean House was identified as the alternate for use as a hospital as the Irish Facilities were found to be unsuitable to that purpose.

Thus, their telegram initiated a long odyssey on the road toward approvals. The process was marked by frustration and questions all along the way. Without getting into specifics, it involved a series of letters, telegrams, hastening all for inputs to make the key contracting decisions. Submissions were also lost or

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Canadian National Telegram, 27 Sep 1939, pg. 5/97

<sup>59</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Rentals for Pictou Highlanders – Telegram: Government of Canada Radio Telegram Services Administered by Disarmament of National Defence, 12 Oct 1939, pg7/97

delayed in the trail of the paperwork, either in the mail or within the internecine battles of the bureaucracy!<sup>60</sup>

The bottlenecks along the way understandably frustrated Lt Col Fraser. But it had a more deleterious impact on his charges for whom he was directly responsible. Continuing delays led to his men being improperly fed, left unwashed and out in the cold.

The staff made one suggestion, to issue the men with a subsistence allowance. This would provide them the means to make their own arrangements for feeding and victualling. That suggestion appears to have been accepted:

“In lieu of the difficulties encountered by us on our quarters and rations payment problem... our suggestion is that the Unit Commander be furnished at this month end with the full amount of allowances in lieu of quarters and rations due the unit as at 30th September 1939. Therefore, all personnel in the unit regardless of how they are billeted, or fed are shown now as drawing full allowances.”<sup>61</sup>

It wasn't just that his men were being fed irregularly, it was also that they were left unwashed. Few facilities were available where a man could wash or shower.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4 – Issues, Reports and Demands:

- a. File 200-1-4, 17 Oct 1939, pg. 9/97
- b. File 200-1-4, 23 Oct 1939 pg. 10/97
- c. File 200-1-4, 24 Oct 1939 – urgency – permission given to make local arrangements if reasonable, pg. 11/97
- d. File 200-1-4, 25 Oct 1939, pg. 12/97
- e. File 200-1-4, 26 Oct 1939, pg. 13/97 – local arrangements made to rent Ms. Hattie home offices and mess \$60/mo. pending approval occupancy 1 Nov 1939 otherwise
- f. File 200-1-4, 24 Oct 1939 (File 27 Oct 1939), pg. 14/97– continuing report problems

<sup>61</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Letter E.L. Clark, Major OC 86 Heavy Battery, RCA., 22 Sep 1939 pg. 6/97

Lt Col Fraser detailed his woes to his Commanding Officer in a personal letter. Bureaucratic indecision lay at the heart of all his problems.

Fraser was initially promised that decisions on accommodation would be made within three weeks of his arrival. Further, he was promised that construction would commence three weeks thence. What was promised and what was delivered, led to inadequate accommodation for his men. What was leased and available, were nothing more than fire traps.

Fraser's appeals to his superior was indicative of the level of stress that he was under. He became increasingly frustrated with the unnecessary roadblocks placed in his way. This began to take a personal toll that eventually led to illness from the stress and worry.

Ablutions were of a great concern. His men were only able to shower once a week. Getting his men adequately accommodated that coming winter meant there was little time to train. So, it became increasingly difficult to move the markers in the training syllabus. All this added to Fraser's worries who eventually had to go to hospital for a few days to re-coup and recover.<sup>62</sup>

Apart from bureaucracy, Lt Col Fraser had other problems arising from local matters. One task, a detail to guard the Commercial Cable Company at Hazelhill, became problematic. The section of men detailed there had not acquitted themselves well. In fact, they trashed their rented accommodation, which raised the ire of its Superintendent and brought forth a complaint to the military staff!

Once again, a series of letters were written on the matter. The original letter of complaint from Mr. Drover of the Commercial Cable Company was followed by a missive from headquarters. It was a missive that Lt Col Fraser did not need, he already had enough on his plate. Fraser in the end, wrote a letter of apology with a promise that the Commercial Cable Company would be compensated for their trouble and losses.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Personal letter from Lt Col Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine, pg. 30-32/97

<sup>63</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4:

- a. Letter of complaint of damages convey by Lt Col A.H.W. Landon to COL Fraser on behalf of Mr. Drover Superintendent Commercial Cable Company Hazelhill, troops wrecked kitchen of leased facility 31 Aug - 29 Oct 1939., pg. 27/97
- b. pg. 28/97 sent same day...letter of apology LT COL Landon to Mr. Drover, Commercial Cable Company, Hazelhill

This was not the unit's most glowing moment. Lt Col Fraser made no excuses for the behaviour of his men. He freely admitted that their behaviour was unacceptable. The unit should have left it cleaner and in a fair state of repair as it was when first occupied.

Beyond that Lt Col Fraser had issues of local personalities to deal with as well. In the hurly burly of getting the contract paperwork staffed, one individual was immovable to the bureaucratic timetable, that involved one Mr. Leet.

Mr. Leet's home was one amongst many that were in the process of rent and lease approval.<sup>64</sup> The Leet home had several entanglements that complicated the process. There was a lien that presented some legal difficulties which had to be resolved first.

Then there was the force of personality, Mr. Leet himself. Mr. Leet worked at night and did not wish to be disturbed at all during the day. The paper trail which began on his home in November 1939 was finally resolved by constant and persistent hastening. The approval of the lease was given in February and

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c. pg. 29/97 ... Commercial Cable Company telegram imitated by Mr. Drover to Lt Col Landon raising first complaint and details therein

<sup>64</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, series of DND letters to MD 6 approval for lease of:

1. Pg. 73/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – MacLean Premise Port Hawkesbury - \$67.50/mo. – hospital
2. Pg. 74/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – St Lawrence Hall Mulgrave - \$80.0/mo. –
3. Pg. 75/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – Hillcrest Hotel Mulgrave – refers to separate letter with details
4. Pg. 76/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – J Leet House – outstanding issues liens difficulty in pinning down Leet – required document outstanding and pending
  - a. (Madigan: re-read this letter might be worth highlight the difficulties!)
5. Pg. 77/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – St Andrews Hall Details and specifics – lease approved @ \$40/mo. started 15 Sep 1939
6. Pg. 78/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – Frame Residence Details and specifics – lease approved @ \$5/mo. started 1 Nov 1939
7. Pg. 79/97, letter 15 Feb 1940 – Frame Garage Details and specifics – lease approved @ \$5/mo. started 10 Nov 1939

finalized in March 1940.<sup>65</sup> It took that long to pin him down to sign and submit the paperwork necessary to pay for the use of his property. It seemed that Mr. Leet was in no hurry to receive his money.

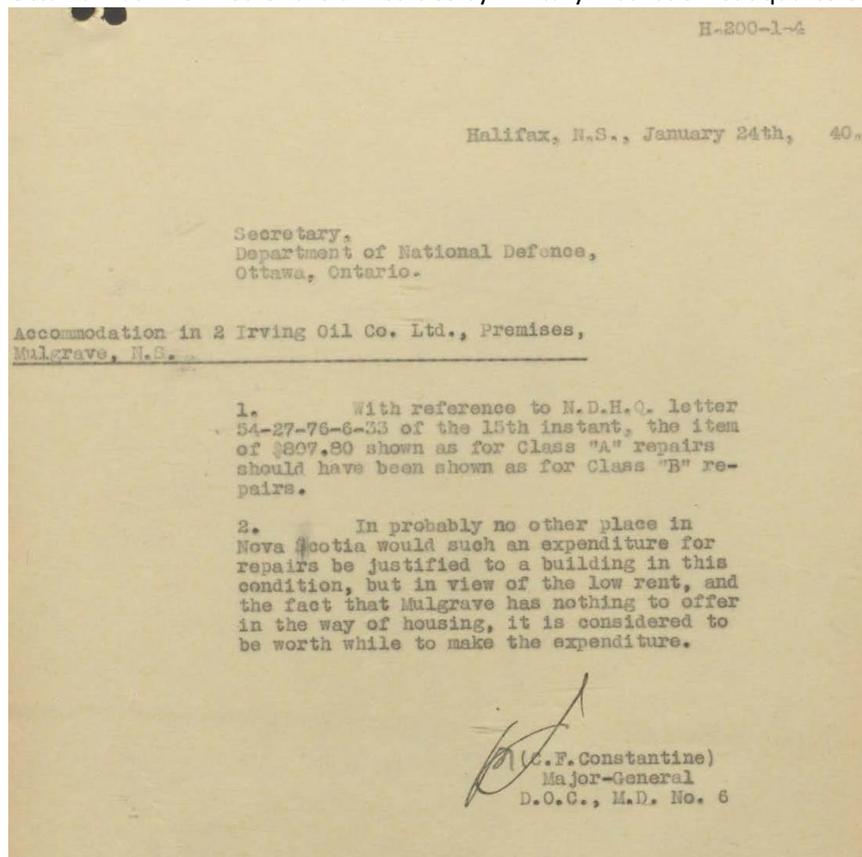
Fraser's situation was finally eased considerably when he was given local authority to lease on a case by case basis with approval from his higher headquarters.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4:

- a. pg. 91/97, 29 Feb 1940 DND letter to MD 6 – hastening paperwork on Leet House ack their difficulties
- b. pg. 96/97, 11 Mar 1940 DND letter to MD 6 – paper work on infamous Mr. Leet House finally received...decision etc. in due course.

The matters all came to a head. It was resolved surprisingly in the following letter. Ottawa was informed of the difficulties by Military District 6 Headquarters:



It was a polite "to hell with you" to the bureaucracy in Ottawa. Reading between the lines, the unit was going to do, what it needed to do, and that was that.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the new approach was they would simply sort out the details later.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, – Letter DND Ottawa to MD 6 approved repairs on Irving properties, pg43/97.

## 6 - The Annual Lull

The Strait of Canso, though a navigable open water passage, was often closed for long periods during winter because of ice conditions. When the Strait was blocked by ice, the threat of direct attack was reduced, and likewise, the required level of vigilance and state of readiness.

This was both a good and a bad thing. The good was it provided a period of rest for the troops. Up until closure, the troops were probably weary from the constant state of vigilance. A heightened state of readiness in anticipation of possible enemy attack was always required. It was demanding.

Constant drills and “standing to” kept the troops on their toes. These were prompted by many command visits and inspections that tested their readiness and preparedness throughout the year. But you cannot keep the troops on their toes forever before exhaustion sets in and reduces their state of readiness and alertness. There was a danger of exhaustion through routine. And routine in of itself can also lead to complacency.

The first year in the Canso Defence Area was a broad learning experience. Many questions were raised and there were also intra-service arguments. Disagreements arose concerning the use and deployment of troops in the setting of dispositions, or as boundaries changed, and as issues evolved. These were not mere physical challenges but were also issues of command and control. Units had to learn how to work together and learn what was most efficient in the way of defending the Canso Strait area.

Constant vigilance also interfered with training and progress. Vigilance was the priority that strained all both mentally and physically. Necessary improvements and training were often deferred as well in the consideration of perceived and developing threats. So, the winter down time was not only a period of rest from regular operations but was also an opportunity to advance the training syllabus.

Downtime was a two-edge sword. The troops had to be kept busy; otherwise, they would develop a lax attitude. But downtime was also an opportunity to train and develop the skills required for survival and operations as a soldier. Downtime

in the Strait in winter was also problematic and had to be balanced. You had to have facilities to train and to accommodate the troops.

Proper training facilities were lacking, so a degree of inventiveness was required. The available accommodation was probably adequate for the warm times of the year but paled in the winter months. Freezing in winter and lack of proper heating added to their pain and suffering, thus threatened moral.

These small details were of great importance. They had an impact on efficiency and operability within the Canso Defence Area. All the small details and how they were dealt with, directly reflected on Lt Col Fraser's command.

Sorting out the administrative details were the minor and daily inconveniences faced by any officer in command. They occupied considerable attention and focus. But beyond that, there was an overlying problem facing Lt Col Fraser. That issue lay in responsibilities of command and control in the Canso Defence Area.

Matters came to a head late 1940. In a letter dated 15 September, an inquiry was received from one Lt Col Dobbie RCA, CO Sydney who questioned the dispositions of the Princess Louise Fusiliers.<sup>67</sup> Lt Col Dobbie stated "Resources at Sydney and Mulgrave were under strength", and he asked when or if these assets would ever be brought up to strength? It was a fair question, but the most important point here lies in the signature block of the letter.

Lt Col Dobbie identified himself as Commanding Officer of both Sydney and Canso. That signature blocked placed him in direct conflict with the authority of Lt Col Fraser of the Pictou Highlanders who was the OC the Canso Strait area! More importantly they were of the same rank. So, command and control boiled down to a question not only of authority and seniority, but was also one, of whose direction subordinate units would act on and follow.

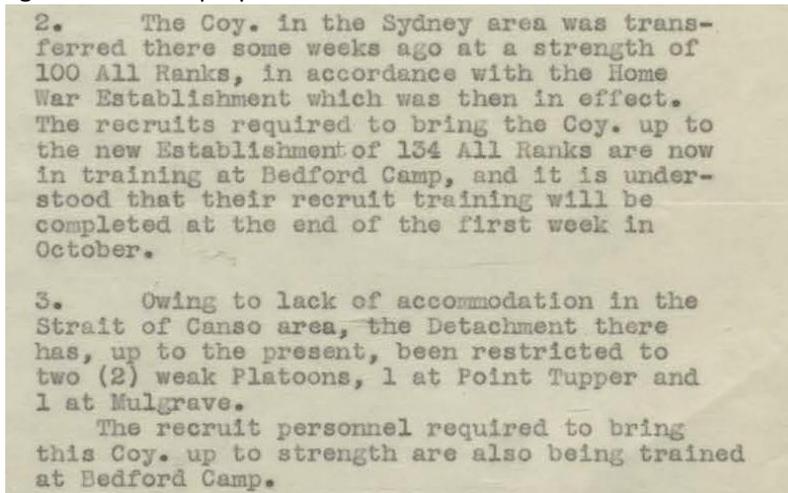
Part of Lt Col Dobbie's command was the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA that was attached to Lt Col Fraser's command. As previously stated, it was a fair question as Lt Col Dobbie still had an interest in the welfare of his troops. There was no indication in this file if this caused any or was a source of friction. But it was the first in a series of command anomalies of a similar vein observed in the Canso Defence Area.

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<sup>67</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 321.9 (D372), Corresp. Instrs., recce reports, etc. Canso Defs generally, Sep 40/May 41, Pg. 21/21

Lt Col Dobbie received a reply to his initial inquiry on 19 Sep 1940. The answer was a simple yes, regarding an intent for further training; "The Defence plans, at present provide for I Coy. of trained P. L. Fus. (MG) in the Sydney area and I Co in the Strait of Canso area".<sup>68</sup>

But the big problem and continuing inhibitor to staffing these billets was once again the lack of proper accommodation:



These letters are very suggestive that as at 15 September 1940, the command arrangements in the Strait of Canso area were largely unsettled. They pose legitimate military questions on the dispositions and staffing of important billets. And yet it seemed, that the OC of the Canso Defence Area was effectively and largely cut out of a discussion, concerning an issue for which he was personally responsible.

This was a very serious breach of military protocol. It could have easily evolved into some dispute. It was a source of friction that questioned Lt Col Fraser's authority. It also questioned his jurisdiction of command and control over operational arrangements regarding his defence area. It suggests that a resolution was required. The resolution to the accommodation problems of Lt Col Fraser though, seems to have been ignored.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 20/21

4. Presumably, the date on which the personnel now undergoing recruit training can be transferred to these Sydney and Strait of Canso areas depends entirely upon when the accommodation is available at both places.

Lt Col Dobbie received in reply, a letter dated 27 September 1940, from a personage of great significance. This letter was signed by his superior officer, MGen WEP Elkins, General Officer Commanding (in Chief) (GoC -in-C) Atlantic Region.

MGen Elkins was another individual with a rank of the highest order who had a command interest and responsibility for the Canso Strait area.<sup>69</sup> There were other generals at a Major General rank who also had an interest in the Canso Strait area. All these bifurcated command arrangements suggest a very complicated internecine command structure, whose paths had to be trod carefully.

MGen Elkins letter, beyond the command issues, also provides an insight into the naval arrangements made for the protection of the Strait that also complicated matters.<sup>70</sup> The significance of his letter concerns the Naval inspection units in the area.

There were two Naval inspection vessels in the Strait; one at the north end, and the other, at the south end of the strait. Both were charged with protecting the straits but neither had proper anti-submarine ASDIC or weaponry to counter such a threat.

HMCS Adversus and HMCS Alachasse were there only temporarily. The RCN had no intention of fitting them with anti-submarine detection or weaponry at that time. Examination vessels were not fitted with depth charges either. The RCN

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 19/21, and

Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Initial Dispositions and Accommodations worked out by 25 Sep 1939, Personal letter from Lt Col Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine, pg. 30-32/97

<sup>70</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 19/21

stated that perhaps these would be replaced when other assets became available and Canso would be considered at that time.

Surprisingly, it was the RCN examination vessels that would play a big role in the events to come. Department of National Defence (DND) Ottawa, advised the GOC-in-C Atlantic Command, 12 November 1940, of the forthcoming dispositions of the examination vessels for Canso's defences and the Strait area.<sup>71</sup>

Ottawa advised Atlantic Command that the examination vessels would soon be withdrawn for the winter. Ottawa forecasted that the northern part of the strait would close 15 November 1940. They also advised that 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA was to remain on the ground until such time that ice conditions did indeed close the Strait to all traffic. Atlantic Command was then apprised that they should be ready for action in the coming spring.

GOC Atlantic also inquired on the feasibility of a plan concerning the Northern Battery on the Northumberland Strait side. That battery could be withdrawn to an area where more intensive training could take place over the winter months. But nothing was mentioned about the southern battery or plans in this particular letter on the Atlantic side.

The looming closure of the northern passage and the coming withdrawal of the examination vessels precipitated action from the GOC-in-C Atlantic. This withdrawal was the opportune time to advance the training of his troops. But he only had a short window to sort it all out. His problem was, where would this training occur and, what proper accommodation was available?<sup>72</sup>

Letters were dispatched to Military District (MD) (6), Halifax, NS and Military District(MD) (7), St. John, NB for their inputs and recommendations.

The first consideration was for the needs of the northern battery, 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA at Beacon Point. The basic inquiry was a request for space to accommodate them in either points in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. Suitable areas for conducting the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 18/21

<sup>72</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 17/21

more intensified and diverse training over the coming winter months were sought.

The inquiry to MD (6) may have been problematic. We know for a fact that the OC of MD 6 was a Major General (MGen), rank equivalent to the GOC-in-C Atlantic. What we have here is a Major General reporting to a superior of same rank. It was certainly not a common circumstance, but it was also not without precedent. But it certainly may have presented some command difficulties where sensibilities may have been easily offended when exercising operational command, control and authority.

Adding to the problem was the sorting out of the dispositions of the Princess Louise Fusiliers for the coming winter. This unit had to be accommodated as well.<sup>73</sup>

Lt Col Dobbie's, OC Sydney and Canso Strait, first correspondence on this issue was dated 17 November 1940. Lt Col Dobbie was advised, that the (machine gunners) m.m.g now situated at Point Tupper and Mulgrave, would be withdrawn from there as soon as accommodation permits. Once again, the OC Canso Defence area, Lt Col Fraser of the Pictou Highlanders was not kept informed by the chain of command in this correspondence.

A further elaboration dated 20 November 1940, gave the final plan and dispositions for the m.m.g. They were to be moved from their current locations to new positions at McNair Point and Mulgrave to become the area reserve.

Their former positions at Mulgrave and Point Tupper would be taken over by infantry, presumably the Pictou Highlanders. One wonders if any effort was made to inform Lt Col Fraser as he was the man on the ground responsible for local defence and the dispositions thereto! His plans and dispositions were circumvented. As the man on the ground, Lt Col Fraser would have been accountable for any or all untoward consequences of these actions.

In the meantime, the administration and the transfer of the northern battery's withdrawal to winter quarters was finally sorted out. The OC 3<sup>rd</sup> (NB) Coast

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg.15-16/21

Brigade in MD (7) concluded that a relocation of 86<sup>th</sup> Bty from Mulgrave to Partridge Island would be of mutual benefit to both units.

By 30 November the issues of accommodation were sorted out regarding the winter quartering of the northern battery 86<sup>th</sup> BTY RCA. The OC MD 7 agreed to hosting them for the winter on recently vacated premises at Partridge Island. There were several problems with these quarters though. The proposed quarters masked the fire of one of his local defence batteries. Hardly a good spot for accommodating troops, who may have been susceptible to their own gunnery fire.

But that concern was a non-issue. The chosen winter quarters were eventually to be torn down. They interfered with the line of fire for No. 2 Gun from Red Head to Cranberry Point that protected St John's Harbour. Second, there was no immediate urgency to tearing down these facilities due to a lack of ammunition that rendered the fire of No 2 Gun moot.<sup>74</sup> The demolition was deferred to a later date. So, the troops were sheltered there that winter.

The winter dispositions of the Northern Battery were finally settled 31 December. The Army received a telegram from the RCN through the GOC -in C Atlantic, who was advised of the closure of the northern entrance and the withdrawal of the RCN examination vessels. It also warned of the coming closure of the southern entrance for the winter.<sup>75</sup> The Strait of Canso was effectively closed to shipping. It was finally time to move the Batteries out of the Strait!

There were some concerns with the contents and distribution of the latest telegram from the RCN. A reply was sent that requested Naval authorities keep DND in the loop. More importantly there was some concern with the total withdrawal of all naval personnel from the area. The Army requested and received an agreement in principle to keep the RCN chief naval examination officer on site for the time being.

But most enlightening was the revelation of the presence of Commander de Wolfe. Commander de Wolfe was a personage of great historical significance who

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 14/21

<sup>75</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 13/21

eventually rose to the heights of RCN leadership in the post war period.<sup>76</sup> De Wolfe likely received his administrative baptism of fire in the management of naval dispositions and inter-service cooperation, here in Canada, in the Strait of Canso!

Additionally, Ottawa was awaiting further authority for the implementation of a leave plan. That authority finally came 23 January 1941.<sup>77</sup> The final movement authorities were issued, moves made and well-deserved leave taken. The disposition of the troops for the winter of 1940/41 was settled at last!

The Strait settled down for a period of rest. The troops were trained and quartered in warmer quarters. Time was spent with families and friends. They were rested and ready for the coming season.

They were all back that spring, 16 May 1941, ready for what the season may bring. The test came when GOC Atlantic received notification from the RCN that two Corvettes were expected to pass in the Canso Strait Area.<sup>78</sup> The men were ready to stand to if needs be!

Looking back, the Strait of Canso finally closed to traffic 6 January 1941. The army was officially notified by Commodore GC Jones, RCN that the withdrawal of the southern examination vessel for the winter would take effect 3 January.<sup>79</sup> The examination of naval traffic was concluded for the season and would only open again in the spring.

With the withdrawal of the examination vessels, there was no further purpose for the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA that winter. The urgent question was “What to do with them?” It took long enough to sort out the Northern Battery, now the Southern Battery had to be contended with too!

A meeting was held amongst the Area and Fortress Commanders on 4 January. They discussed this urgent matter and came up with a unique plan and proposal.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 12/21

<sup>77</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg.4-6/21

<sup>78</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 2-3

<sup>79</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372),Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 10 &11/21

First and foremost, the Area and Fortress Commanders discussed the training requirements of 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA amongst others. But it all boiled down to what to do with and where to dispose of the men for the winter. The OC Defence Sydney and Strait area proposed the release of 150 men all ranks for a two-month period while keeping a minimum staff on hand. This minimal staff would be employed on maintenance and defence as the Strait from 31 December 1940 to 15 March 1941.

The released men (150) were absorbed as follows; Halifax (70), St John (50) and Sydney (30) in a diverse training plan so to spread out the accommodation requirements. That was a start, but it wasn't enough to dent the wave of men relieved from the defence task in the Strait for the winter.

They discussed the matter further and came up with leave recommendation that were proposed to Ottawa. In short, the Area and Fortress Commanders recommended a three-month bulk annual leave request for the Strait units that year. If implemented, this request posed to significantly reduce the accumulated leave burden noted in Halifax and St John (50%) and Sydney (40%).<sup>80</sup>

The proposal was put forward to Ottawa 10 January 1941 where it was considered. It wasn't long before a reply was received. The first part of the plan was agreed to on 21 January. The units were free to make moves to winter quarters as recommended. Arrangements and rail movements were arranged accordingly.<sup>81</sup>

But Ottawa was still awaiting further authority for the implementation of the leave plan. That authority finally came 23 January 1941.<sup>82</sup> The final movement authorities were issued, moves made and well-deserved leaves taken. The disposition of the troops for the winter of 1940/41 was settled at last!

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 9/21

<sup>81</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg. 7-8/21

<sup>82</sup> Ibid Dead files 321.9 (D372), Canso Defs general Sep 40/ May 41, Pg.4-6/21

## 7 - Hustle and Bustle of the Job

The first steps to winning the war were taken in places like Mulgrave, late 1939 and early 1940. The Pictou Highlanders and many other reserve units played such a huge role.

It was at places such as these, where many Canadian Force units trained, learned their trade, and were hardened as functional units. Those activities in the Strait of Canso Defence Area have been recorded, documented, trials and tribulations exposed from the start up in training, to cohesion as functioning units.

The process of becoming combat teams also involved and engaged many others posted to the Canso Strait Area. These teams included elements such as the 86<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery R.C.A, a Military Hospital, No. 5 Fortress Signals, No. 1 Fortress Coy. RCASC, 3rd Fortress (E&M) Coy., and P.L. Fusiliers.<sup>83</sup>

The development and evolution of leadership here, in Canada, were key to the qualities and abilities required for the eventual liberation of Europe. It was a case of the development of the senior and non-commissioned officers, subalterns, junior and senior officers who would eventually lead the men in the field. There was a method and that method is found under administration and in the various situation reports (AKA – SITREPS).

Unit SITREPS were the finger on the pulse of a unit's health, state of training, and morale. The assessment of a unit's well being and readiness is often found in the minutia of various administrative queries from higher headquarters. These queries highlight not only the good, but also the bad.

Generally, the history found in various situation reports can be broken down in several parts. The first part provides an assessment of the unit's status at given times. These parts include comments on:

1. Discipline
2. Sports and recreation
3. Medical

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<sup>83</sup> Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 321.009 (D373), **Situation Reports Aug to Sep 1940**, 27 Aug 1940, pg. 2/13

4. Intelligence
5. General
6. Absentees.

The part 1 provides an insight on the various, and number of disciplinary problems encountered by a unit. Most of the problems concerned absenteeism.<sup>84</sup>

Perusing then the first reports, we can find an overall assessment and baseline for unit discipline in the Strait of Canso Area. The first reports were submitted by Lt Col Fraser of the Pictou Highlanders, Officer Commanding - Canso Defence Area.

The two major units, the Pictou Highlanders were assessed as “good” while the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty (RCA) only fair. Perhaps there was a little bias in the assessment. In one report the numbers under detention at one time for the Highlanders and Gunners was roughly the same (5 max).

In the same report, other units were also observed. One member from the small in number, military hospital – discipline unrated, was away without authority (9 hrs). It was only a short while and, yet someone paid the price for a nine-hour lapse in self discipline.<sup>85</sup> Regardless there was no scale used that would suggest how one unit was rated good, another fair.<sup>86</sup>

Weekly, all units were kept on their toes and at a high state of readiness. Lt Col Fraser performed several tests. These tests amounted to surprise visits and “stand to’s”. These random unannounced visits tested the time to man stations or guns.

Lt Col Fraser found all to have performed these well, both with speed and efficiency. So, given the limits of their training and call to action, his units under command were ready for anything that would have been thrown them if it came to pass at all! That would be the final test – actual action, a test that fortunately never came.

Reflecting on the initial reports, it was hard to accept the higher rating of a good disciplinary assessment for the Pictou Highlanders while the 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA rated

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 2-3/13

<sup>85</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 1-13/13

<sup>86</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 2/13

only fair. The numbers under disciplinary action were equivalent.<sup>87</sup> There was probably more to it than “discipline”.

How were units assessed? Perhaps Lt Col Fraser or his staff made such assessments based on the unit strength. For example, his medical staff of 13, in his total of 666 command strength, represented only 2% of his command. That might have been enough to assess the subunit’s discipline as deplorable. But this unit wasn’t assessed as such. Then again, there may have been a case of favouritism, and perhaps, some professional jealousy too in the assessment of a brother in arms. There was always a healthy rivalry between gunners and infanters that may have come into play!

But really, there was nothing untoward on the military side in these first reports.<sup>88</sup> The Officer Commanding (OC) the Canso Defence Area merely reported the usual routine and minor military infractions found regularly by any military unit, as defaulters. There was no significant change in intelligence or medical status. This suggests that the unit had indeed settled down over their short time. The Canso Defence Area was a relatively safe and calm one, given the assessment of the current threat, that was basically low.

The only unusual event of note was a general observation that two other ranks from 86<sup>th</sup> Battery (Bty) RCA were charged and convicted by civil power. These men were subsequently discharged and struck off the Battery’s strength. It was unknown what charges were preferred, or why these men were released. The weekly report did not elaborate further. Perhaps that was enough to lower this unit’s disciplinary assessment to “fair”.

The story in Mulgrave was neither one of misery nor tedium. Yes, there were difficulties in getting established. Those difficulties were met, for the most part, professionally; while others were met with compassion.

Certain Highland soldiers on shore patrol came upon a house one day. They were thirsty and asked for water. They observed a little four-year-old girl with a leg bent in an unusual shape hopping around on home made crutches. They were shocked by her condition.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg.7/13

<sup>88</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg. 3/13

This little one suffered from tubercular knee and ankle disease. Her parents were too poor and could not afford an operation that would ease her pain and suffering. These soldiers were quite distressed and brought news back to the unit. They could not stand to see such suffering. So, they managed to canvas the unit and put the necessary cash for an operation together, then rushed the young girl to the children's hospital in Halifax, hoping for a miracle. When she returned home, the soldiers of the Pictou Highlanders visited and found her in a cast not down crested. They found to their relief, one happy child, all smiles with rosy cheeks. She had recovered from her ordeal quite nicely.<sup>89</sup>

But it had become routine by 1940. Two situation reports for 25 and 27 August were virtually the same report. These were written as if the staff merely copied one report from the other and sent it on to the higher command. But the importance of these reports shouldn't be underestimated. Even if there was no change in status, these reports documented; the unit's activities, its well being, as well as the operational tempo at a specific point in time. They recorded both the good and the bad.

Documentation is the lifeblood of military life from which later assessments are often made. If something happened and was not documented, then heads would surely roll. On the other hand, documentation also attests to what was done, when and where it was done, and thus could easily be used to measure success/failings in the aftermath of events.

So, reporting was of great importance. Reporting was a great part of the military disciplinary structure, in delineating matters of what was done, and what was left undone. The details would often come to the fore to any Board of Inquiry or Summary Investigation as an attestation to a Commanding Officer's (CO) and units' fitness, leadership, and combat or operational efficiency. Reporting was a matter of military routine.

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<sup>89</sup> OZORAK, Paul. **Abandoned Military Installations of Canada, Volume 3: Atlantic**. [Ottawa: Paul Ozorak, 2001]. **ISBN Number: 0969512732 / 9780969512738, pg. 204**

Reports were necessary in assessing not only the physical plant and assets, but also the maintenance of military discipline, the health and welfare of the men serving while on active service or under training!

Men were kept active with sports and recreation at these units. The early reports of August-September 1939 suggested that the men were in a good state of health. There were no accidents. The hospital was kept busy doing military inspections and updating inoculations.

The hospital was independently assessed as well. Lt Col JGD Campbell, OC No 7, General Reserve Hospital, reviewed it for fitness on 30 August 1939. This visit precipitated a change of command of sorts. There was a subsequent review of its establishment.

Exactly one year later, Major (QM) CM Williams RCAMC representing the District Ordnance Office, arrived at the hospital on 30 August 1940. He was there to close out the Ordnance Account of 21<sup>st</sup> Field Ambulance (Fd AMb). This closure saw the transfer of 21<sup>st</sup> Fd AMb to its proper place.

In the closure of 21<sup>st</sup> Fd AMb, its account was transferred from Ordnance to the Military Hospital Mulgrave installation. That business was completed 1 Sep 1940. It was at this point in the transfer, that the facility truly became a military hospital at Mulgrave and acted as an independent entity.

In the meantime; however, all unit training continued satisfactorily with small range and rifle range practices. Beacon Hill achieved a good level and standard in the training of its new recruits. Four Pictou Highlanders were selected and sent to a gas course at Sydney that week. The range of required combat skills continued to grow and be developed.

But the real kicker to the events was found in “intelligence and general sections” of the weekly report. It highlights the sensitive nature of the Canso Defence Area. and concern for its protection, safety, and welfare. All who lived and served there were sensitive to possible enemy intrusion and reported any strange happenings in due course.

Five members of the Norwegian ship “Noref Jord” were loading pulp wood at St Francis Harbour. They were overheard making pro-Nazi statements in a local bar. The crew was taken into area Headquarters and questioned.

After interrogation, they were taken back to their ship where its Master was informed of their behaviour. The Ship's Master stated that he would reprimand the crew and that this behaviour would not happen again.

Their attitude seemed odd given that Norway was then occupied by Germany. Yet we cannot discount the fact that not all Norwegians favoured or supported the Allied cause. But Norwegians were well received and accepted elsewhere in Nova Scotia during the war. This was particularly true around the South Shore where the Norwegians had a Camp known as "Little Norway".

Maybe their words were misunderstood because of the idiom and of the foreign dialect spoken. These may have raised suspicions in what was, the closed world, of Nova Scotia at the time.

The war opened many doors to new contacts. At the same time the world was a worrying place and loose lips did sink ships! So, any concern would have to be addressed by local authorities who had no choice but to investigate.

What was likely determined was, these men were disgruntled and frustrated with their lot, and merely acting out. They meant no harm and were simply letting off steam. But they were interrogated anyway as a precaution, then let go, as nothing untoward was found.

The series of situation reports in the first year at Canso says a lot about the Pictou Highlanders' in Mulgrave as it ended, 1940. It was typical of military life. It displays both the highs and lows of serving there. There were periods of tedium interspersed with times of sheer terror and action. But for the most part it was routine, and routine led to boredom.

The area commander's main problem continued to be housing and accommodation. This problem was exacerbated by the increase of several cases of scabies, an infectious disease spread by mites in close quarters.

The other issue was morale, reflected in the increase of absenteeism that was soon addressed as well. Another welcomed recreational outlet for the men was provided by the opening of the Legion Hut. Here the men could come and watch a movie or generally relax and play games, write letters home or study. The Legion played a big role during the war by providing comforts and amenities to the troops.

But the big concern for the Pictou Highlanders, at least at this point, was the jump in the number of its absentees:<sup>90</sup>

- 1 36 – Pictou Highlanders
- 2 4 – 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA
- 3 1 – Signals

It was a wonder that some staff officer in Military District (MD) 6 had not raised a question concerning this level of absenteeism as the rate had risen notably in the three-week period under review. Yet the unit held to its “good” discipline rating when the figures suggested otherwise.

For better or worse, the units in the Canso Defence Area had settled down into a routine. This routine laid the foundations, skills and leadership that would benefit them in the field in Western Europe and Italy. The Army was becoming mature.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid Dead Files 321.009 (D373), pg.13/13

## 8 - Life and Trials of the Guns

Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt Col) Dobbie was the senior artillery officer responsible for the safe, efficient functioning, and siting of all guns in Cape Breton and Canso area. His command was known as "Sydney and Canso Defences". 86<sup>th</sup> Bty (RCA) was one of his subordinate artillery units, lodged in the Strait of Canso Area. 86<sup>th</sup> Bty (RCA) was accountable to him for its overall efficiency. Lt Col Dobbie was de facto, the chief gunner RCA, Sydney NS.

As chief artillery officer, Lt Col Dobbie was responsible for the smooth operation of the guns. That responsibility included training, siting, and other administrative matters in their function. However operational control of the guns was ceded to the local area commander for his defence, while in active contact with the enemy.

Canada declared war on Germany 10 September 1939. It was surprising how quickly the troops were mobilized and moved to protect vital areas. The work and trials of the gunners in this mobilization gives us some insight into the initial preparations for the Canso Area. Those efforts predated the war by at least one year.

It is often stated "Canada was unprepared for war. The regular army of 4500 men, augmented by 51,000 partly trained reservists, possessed virtually no modern equipment. The air force had fewer than 20 modern combat aircraft, while the navy's combat potential consisted of only six destroyers, the smallest class of ocean-going warships. It was a modest beginning."<sup>91</sup>

Again, what was significant in this statement was the comment about the reservists, a 51000 partly trained force. It was they who were amongst the first mobilized and moved to fill in the gaps.

But preliminary staff work had been ongoing in the background. Some hint of that was found in a letter, 15 July 1941 from Dobbie to Atlantic Command HQ to

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<sup>91</sup> Canadian War Museum:

Source: [http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931goes\\_to\\_e.shtml](http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931goes_to_e.shtml)

Accessed: 27 Sep 2016

that effect. Lt Col Dobbie stated that the Melford Bty position was determined and selected by a group of officers in 1938:

1. “The position for this Battery, as selected by Lt. Col. Earnshaw, Lt. Col. Tremaine and Captain Treat in 1938, was in the woods just North of the present Officers' Mess.”
2. “ On 26th August, 1939, I received verbal orders from D.O.C., M.D. No. 6, to proceed to Sydney and Canso Area with Lt. Col. Simpson, Works Officer, R.C.E., and select a number of preliminary positions, which could be occupied in minimum time and would not interfere with the construction of the ultimate positions previously chosen.”<sup>92</sup>

So, the first battery position at Melford was indeed determined and selected by a group of officers back in 1938, pre-dating the war by at least one year.

We have no idea how the ground was prepared for the receipt of a battery. There was little indication that anything was done beyond merely identifying locations.

As Lt Col Dobbie was already in selected alternate positions, he proceeded to set up his guns so additional work could be undertaken. The guns would be brought forward later into a more favoured and preferred locations as soon as new positions were constructed. They offered protective cover in the meantime in their alternate positions.

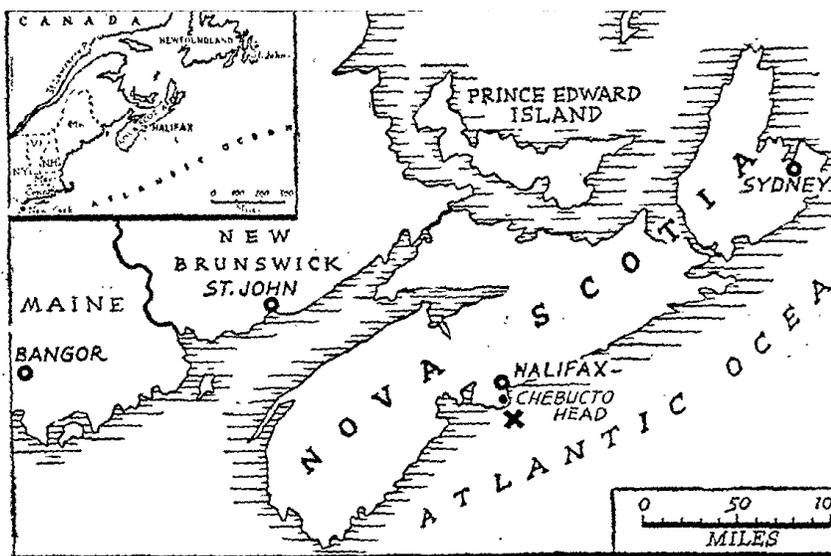
On war's declaration, these positions were quickly occupied and defended. The real work to build adequate gun placements, was in fact, deferred until an actual declaration of war. Upon that declaration, further defence work was subsequently contracted, and undertaken later. The construction not only improved those positions, but also their operational efficiency.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 321.009 (D374), Drawings, corresp., reports, instructions etc. re AA & Coast Arty in Canso area, Aug 40/Oct 41, pg. 7-8

<sup>93</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 7-8

There was good reason for all this care and attention. Mulgrave, Sydney and other areas in the Maritimes lay along the approaches to potential U-boat incursion. There were both anecdotal and real encounters with the Kriegsmarine and local fishing boats. It was even rumoured that one ran up Country Harbour River one night and reversed course back out to sea.<sup>94</sup>



**SUBMARINE REPORTED OFF NOVA SCOTIA — Co**

Canadian War Museum, Democracy at War, Canadian Newspapers and the Second World War (Archives), *Submarine Reported Off Nova Scotia*, Hamilton Spectator 21 September 1939

The sensitivity and strategic locations of these areas required that all possible security measures be taken within available means and manpower!

Mulgrave and Canso at the time were located at natural choke points. There was no Canso Causeway; hence no obstacle to navigation of the Strait. The Causeway came only later long after the war had been fought and won. In the meantime,

<sup>94</sup> Robert Walsh- Gerry Madigan, *Interview 8 June 2015*, 1230-1330 hrs in Gerry Madigan, *Mystery on the Lake*, 29 June 2015 (Serialized Guysborough Journal 2015, also at madiganstories.com

the Strait of Canso was an open stretch of navigable waters, albeit in a confined area. But it had to be secured, nonetheless.

The railway moved goods from Cape Breton by ferry to the mainland. And they were important goods too, from the coal that fueled many homes and industries in eastern Canada, to the fish that was harvested from the out ports along the Cape Breton coast, that fed the bellies of many families in Ontario, Quebec, and parts west!

Then there was steel. Sydney was particularly important and vital to Canada's steel production. A steel plant had been located there for many years.

"Construction of the steel plant started on July 1, 1899 – and two years later, in 1901, the plant was producing steel. In fact, by 1912, the plant was making almost half of all the steel in Canada. At its peak, SYSCO could produce 800,000 tonnes of pig iron and 900,000 tonnes of crude steel annually."<sup>95</sup>

The Sydney steel plant was just as important and vital to Canada in the Second World War as it was during the Great War. The closure of such a choke point, even momentarily, would have had grave consequences, and been a serious blow to Canadian morale.

Suddenly the purpose and reason for placing Lt Col Dobbie's guns in Sydney and at the Strait of Canso become very clear. More to the point was the wisdom of the action taken in 1938 to site these guns well before the conflict. Someone in the know either in government or the military had foresight to act and take preliminary action.

What follows in the aftermath of those early decisions is the story of work required for the final preparations of the Canso Defence Area undertaken by Lt Col Dobbie and his staff.

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<sup>95</sup> Sysco, Sydney Steel Corporation, Sydney Nova Scotia, A Brief History, Sydney Steel Museum, December 24, 2004

Source: <http://www.sysco.ns.ca/history.htm>

Accessed: 15 Oct 2016

It began innocently in a letter to the Quartermaster General (Ottawa), 13 January 1941. This letter's sole purpose was to initiate a discussion on necessary preparations in the Canso Defence area. The letter that was sent by the GOC-in-C Atlantic, basically opened a can of worms!

The impacts on Melford and Beacon Batteries are found in a stream of formal correspondence commencing 9 February 1941. In reply to GOC-in-C Atlantic, the Quartermaster General (Ottawa) apprised him of several outstanding unresolved issues in the Canso Strait area that had to be addressed before further considerations could go forward. Most notably amongst his list were the needs of the guns as seen through the eyes of the QM(G)!<sup>96</sup>

GOC-in-C Atlantic's letter only drew the Quartermaster General's (QM (G)) attention to the following facts:

"After the inspection visit of the Chief of General Staff last October to the Atlantic Command, the following observations were made regarding Melford Battery:

'The temporary mountings appear to be satisfactory for the purpose for which this Battery is required and the works are at present well concealed from observation from the air and sea. In the circumstances, it is considered that the only important additional permanent installation required near the gun platforms is an underground magazine.'<sup>97</sup>

The Quartermaster General ((QM (G) ) went on to elaborate their reasoning for no additional storage. Their staff had already observed the requirements at a similar battery. They concluded that the facilities as constructed were adequate for the purpose at hand. The only new addition the QM (G) supported, was a requirement for an underground magazine. That sole requirement was approved.

And yet despite their reluctance to proceed any further on other matters, the Quartermaster General requested additional details in the form of sketches, labour and other material before any further move was made in consideration for the new addition of an underground magazine.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 23/23

<sup>97</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 23/23

And so, began the administrative trek of Lt Col Dobbie to sorting out the details of his command that not only involved construction, but eventually, the movement and placement of the guns.

Lt Col Dobbie was not satisfied with some of the current dispositions. He noted gaps. Even under his command authority and professional interest, the movement and placement of guns were not always within his purview to dispose of or act upon. A simple letter precipitated a controversy of professional judgement amongst his peers that required resolution. In short, a simple inquiry created a whole lot of new staff work!

Lt Col Dobbie's staff work, like many of his peers, was constantly questioned and rechecked. It was only logical to have a second review given the strategic importance of his command. Finally, even if Lt Col Dobbie wanted to move these projects forward, he did not control the placement or disposition of the guns he thought were required to do his job.

For example, Lt Col Dobbie made a request on behalf of his command on 8 March 1941. He requested the movement of an 18-pound gun from its current position at Beacon Point, to a new location known as Chapel Battery.

MD (6) replied to that request on 17 March. Lt Col Dobbie was apprised that the advisability of moving this gun was considered previously, 24 August 1940. That request was refused because of the required support for the navy examination services.

At that time, the gun positions were a potential neutralizer and block against the possible threat of enemy Motor Torpedo Boat attack. These boats operated close inshore and shoals; however unlikely the possibility. That potential threat put paid to Lt Col Dobbie's request, and the existing gun lay out remained in place. Further he was also told that this arrangement was once considered, in the existing gun lay out previously approved by NDHQ.<sup>98</sup> It seems a change was immutable.

It appeared that Lt Col Dobbie's recommendation was not acted upon for the various reasons already considered. However, Dobbie was apprised that if there

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 22/23

were any new developments, that may warrant such a move from the Beacon to the Chapel Battery, it might be considered in future.<sup>99</sup>

There was a hive of activity on the administrative front. The matter of the guns was both urgent and important. Another letter from the Quartermaster General to GOC-in- C Atlantic was received shortly after the Beacon Battery question, 18 March. This time their inquiry concerned Melford.<sup>100</sup>

It was a straight and simple query. The QM (G) requested information regarding the building of a concrete splinter proof ammunition shelter. Apparently Melford had a corrugated metal shelter that was inadequate for the purpose at hand. Beacon Point had a purpose-built concrete structure. The QM (G) requested a recommendation for a new build for Melford Battery as well as, the addition and cost estimates required to update that battery, to the same standard as Beacon Point.<sup>101</sup>

It became a matter of extreme urgency as there was always a U-boat threat in the area. But a real incursion into the Gulf of St Lawrence only came in 1942. That incursion forced reconsideration of past decisions. In the meantime, though, the military faced a potential and real threat and prepared seriously for the worse with what was at hand.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 22/23

<sup>100</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 21/23

<sup>101</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 21/23

<sup>102</sup> Caribou Source from: Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, Sinking of the *Caribou*, Article by Paul Collins. (<http://drpaulwcollins.com>). ©2006, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site  
Source: <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/politics/caribou-sinking.php>  
Accessed: 19 Jan 2017

Canadian War Museum, Democracy at War, Canadian Newspapers and the Second World War (Archives), **Suspicious craft not a Submarine**, Hamilton Spectator 15 September 1939 Source: <https://collections.museedelhistoire.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5120193>  
Accessed: 27 April 2019

Canadian War Museum, Democracy at War, Canadian Newspapers and the Second World War (Archives), **Submarine Reported Off Nova Scotia**, Hamilton Spectator 21 September 1939, Associated Press  
Source: <https://collections.museedelhistoire.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5120190>  
Accessed: 27 Apr 2019

And so, Major-General H.P. Elkins, G.O.C. -In-C. finally initiated the process for the approval for the splinter proof shelter for Melford 24 Mar 1941. Once again, this inquiry requested costs, site plans and relation to other structures so G.O.C-in C Atlantic could move the approvals along through the upper echelons for consideration.<sup>103</sup>

A reply was soon received 5 April 1941 from Brigadier CE Connolly on behalf of OC MD (6). Surprisingly though, his expected reply did not recommend the project, nor that the construction of a concrete ammunition bunker go forward. He based his recommendation on two points, cost and functionality.

The cost of the concrete bunker was estimated at \$9000. In contrast, the current corrugated sandbag bunker only cost \$400. He doubted that a concrete overhead provided any additional protection. Brigadier CE Connolly stated that an additional layer of sandbags on the current bunker would suffice for the requirements of additional protection.

Brigadier CE Connolly went on to elaborate on the functionality of the current bunker. "The magazine accommodation at Melford Battery consists of the semi-circular corrugated steel ammunition shelter protected by layers of sandbags on all sides and on the roof. The size is 13' x 10'. This magazine is dry, and the correct temperature is easily maintained."<sup>104</sup>

Brigadier CE Connolly's recommendation was then forwarded to the Secretary, Department of National Defence Ottawa, 15 April 1941. Equally surprising, the GOC-in-C (Atlantic) also supported CE Connolly's recommendation not to proceed with the construction of the concrete bunker at Melford, stating that "The cost under these conditions are not justified".

Part of their reasoning was the site factors at Melford Battery. These factors were dissimilar to those at Beacon Point for the construction of its concrete bunker:

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 18-20/23

<sup>104</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 17/23

4. It is estimated that it would cost \$4000.00 to construct a concrete magazine at Melford similar to the type installed at Beacon Battery which is only splinter proof. At Beacon the magazine is constructed on a side hill and drainage is not a serious problem. At Melford, however, the magazine would have to be buried below ground level on a comparatively level site and drainage would be more difficult. It is possible, therefore, that the design used for Beacon would not satisfy requirements for the Melford magazine site.

It is interesting to note that a low and high estimate were cited. The \$4000 figure (the lower estimate) was not stated in any prior correspondence. It may have been cited elsewhere but was not found in the records. A high estimate of \$9000 was also given as a reason not to proceed:

5. If a magazine similar to surface type design used at Fort Amherst were constructed drainage would not be a factor but the cost of construction is estimated at \$9000.00 which is considered out of proportion to the requirements of Melford Battery.

The improvements to the gun position and defence works seems to have been placed on the back burner at this point. Some emphasis was now placed towards the efficacy of the guns and the positions. Prior staff appreciations came under review. They were now brought forward.

Colonel C.S. CRAIG, D.S.O. M.C., R.C.A. initially authored a military appreciation of the employment of the guns at Beacon Bty in support of the Naval Examination Services (Halifax, N.S. 6th July 1940). His appreciation detailed the pro's and con's of various gun positions and the preliminary considerations for the defence of the Strait of Canso. That appreciation centred on the gun's primary task, supporting the Naval Examination Services.<sup>105</sup>

But there were outstanding issues left over from Colonel Craig's initial appreciation. These issues had to be addressed. The big issue was the dead ground in one area and the potential threat from Coastal Motor Boats that involved the placement and re-positioning of one 18-pound gun.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 13-15

Coastal defence batteries and Fortresses were fixed positions, and as such, the OC of these did not have authority to make those changes on their own accord. They required staff approval at the highest levels for it involved the strategic defence of the Nation.

Lt Col Dobbie, Commanding Sydney and Canso defence areas stated his considerations to Atlantic Command for the movement of the 18 pounder to a new gun position. It would seem from the discussions in his letter of 15 April 1941, that the new position of the gun, would not materially make much of a difference to his defence or use in the examination services to the untrained eye.

There were some pros to the new position. But Lt Col Dobbie's letter leaves much up in the air. It led to the intervention of the senior staff in making a final decision on the matter.

For example, he stated that "Ground conditions made it impossible to make a careful reconnaissance on foot of this area until yesterday, when the Officer Commanding, Sydney & Canso Defences with four other officers covered all the shoreline from NEW BEACON BATTERY to HARBOUR BOUCHE (sic)."

He went on to say that "If the gun is kept in the new position for normal examination service purposes" it will not provide any more "protection against M.T. B.'s operating in shoal water" than the main armament. It could serve this purpose however, if placed near No. 5 light below the lighthouse. Bring-to rounds, if necessary, could then be fired from the main armament."

Finally, "If this action is taken, a shelter will be needed near the lighthouse where there is already a lookout post and telephone."<sup>106</sup>

This letter was a prevarication of sorts. It did not easily lead to any conclusion or recommendations for an informed decision. It was simply a statement of facts from the man on the ground, from which the staff in Ottawa could then assess the strategic needs of the country and draw their own conclusions and recommendations. It placed the onus on the higher headquarters.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 12

Lt Col Dobbie's indecision and prevarication probably arose from the consideration of the threat from motor torpedo boats. It must have been determined at this point that there was no credible threat in that regard, in the shoals, or in around the Canso Strait Area. The ranges of MTBs, their limited ability, and the risks involved for the German Navy to deploy them, suggested the threat unlikely. Yet the U-boat threat was very real indeed. U-boats carried a gun with great destructive power. Lt Col Dobbie was very much concerned with the one blind spot.

Lt Col Dobbie addressed his remaining concern to Atlantic Command 16 April 1941. Dobbie received additional information regarding Motor Torpedo Boats that resulted in a recommendation not to pursue a substantive move of the guns. But there remained the requirement for a gun of some calibre at the Chapel Battery in his professional opinion.

Lt Col Dobbie stated, "In view of the Anti-Coastal Motor Boat role of his gun, it is not recommended that it be moved, but the desirability for a "bring-to" gun at Chapel Battery still exists, as stated in my letter of 8<sup>th</sup> March 1941".<sup>107</sup>

This packet of opinion was put forward for deliberation and decision. In the meantime, Ottawa decided on the defence works and concrete bunker at Melford. NDHQ finally decided 22 April commensurate with Brigadier CE Connolly's original recommendation.

NDHQ decided not to build the splinter proof shelter at Melford. Melford would make do by adding additional layers of sand bagging to its corrugated structure. NDHQ's decisions were conveyed to the units concerned 25 April 1941.<sup>108</sup> The Melford defence works was finally put to bed, or was it?

The work on defence positions never ceased, as changing strategic considerations and other circumstances, constantly prompted change. Even as late as 1941, this was both a serious and worrisome problem, even when defence positions had already been established.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 11

<sup>108</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 9-10

<sup>109</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 7-8/23

The senior staff had other problems, contended with daily. There remained a requirement for alternate positions and other hazards, which had to be considered. Such consideration was wise. Defensive positions of the batteries had to be in depth, with a clear plan forward, and with a view to the event of attack or invasion along those shores.

Melford Point was in a sensitive area. The OC Sydney and Canso Defences were ordered to conduct a reconnaissance of their defence in depth. It meant that adjustments were inevitable. But they also had to contend with history and previous siting that committed their defences, that now had to be adjusted if required.

The Melford battery position was placed at the southern end of the Strait of Canso. This position offered optimal protection and control of the Strait at that point; "The requirements for MELFORD BATTERY included control of the Southern entrance to the Strait from the Atlantic and Lennox Passage and as far up the Strait as possible. This necessitated an arc of fire of almost 180° and it was recognized that at extreme right or left one gun might interfere with the other for a short time." That was the advantage of a permanent position. A permanent position considered all possibilities that avoided the risk of interference.

The temporary positions were only in place to get the examination and defences underway. These positions were fortuitous and complimentary to what would become main positions later in the war. They had been established well before the permanent positions were constructed. If there were any concerns about them, these were addressed in:

4. "As no mechanical dials or transmission systems were then available, a temporary B.C. Post was erected 200 feet South East of No. 1 gun, which gives a clear view in all directions of fire as well as EDDY POINT BEACH and EDDY COVE, which are possible landing places. This B.C. Post is within six degrees of the line of fire of No. 1 gun when engaging a ship rounding EDDY POINT, out at 200 feet the blast from a 4-inch gun would not be dangerous."

The gunners sited their positions well. The siting allowed a natural flow and a transition to new positions as shore defences were constructed and occupied. The old siting also created the alternate positions for defence in depth. These existing

alternate positions could be fallen back upon, and then defended from, in the event of attack.

Now that the gun positions were ready, further discussion and consideration was given to the ancillary forces that would also be in place. One ancillary force was the searchlight battery. It would be beneficial to locate this in support of the guns for night and anti-aircraft work. The details and recommendations were:

5. "If it is intended that this position shall be permanent, it is recommended that B.C. Post and Searchlight Directing Station be built among the trees in rear of the present magazine (a 21-ft. platform has been constructed which shows that a good view can be obtained with very little topping of trees). If the Searchlight Directing Station is stepped in rear of the B.O. Post, as at SANDWICH BATTERY, the building will have a good background of trees."

The final two paragraphs of this letter deal with the movement of No 1 gun and communications on site. Lt Col Dobbie recommended that No 1 Gun be moved from its current position, to a new position 10 feet south of the B.C. post. This move would bring the gun within 300 ft. of No 2 Gun presumably for better positioning, for mutual support, and for covering the beaches and approaches to Eddy Point and Eddy Cove.

The co-location of the guns and lights would simplify his communications requirements by telephone and failing that, by loudspeaker soon to be installed.

Such were the fine details considered in what really was an ongoing review of the Strait defences during the war!<sup>110</sup> And that work was continuous.

By September 1941 there were new guns in the area that were ostensibly more powerful, but these also brought their own unique set of problems. The Melford and Beacon Batteries had their equipment upgraded and replaced with 4" Naval Guns.<sup>111</sup> These guns were fitted with unique sites and had to be adjusted for local conditions. The OC Sydney and Canso Defence was required to provide

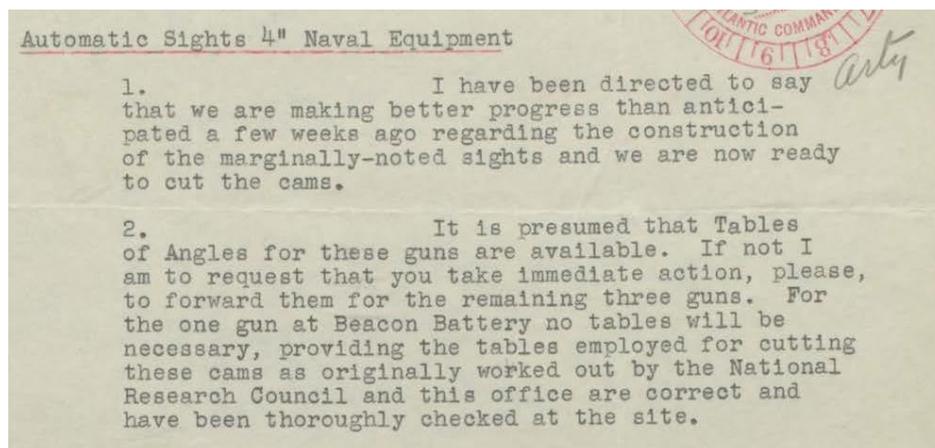
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<sup>110</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 7-8/23

<sup>111</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 6/23

information and new site tables for the Strait area because of these improvements.

NDHQ continued to raise several issues to Atlantic Command. An inquiry on 23 September 1941, concerned the administrative work required in part for Melford and Beacon Bty. New gunsights had to be built for these batteries and their marginal sight replaced if they were to be effective at all. NDHQ was following on seeking the details to ensure that these guns would be employed and operationally effective:



Given the importance of the position, the information was urgently required in the extreme as the gun sights were custom made and fitted to the location!

So urgent was the requirement, Atlantic Command forwarded the necessary information by phone on 23 September, followed up with a confirming letter on 25 September 1941.<sup>112</sup>

The letter following up the NDHQ inquiry, restated in writing:

1. "Further to our telephone conversation of this date (23 Sep 1941). The following information has been ascertained: -

<sup>112</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 5/23

Trunnion Heights - Beacon 236.27 Feet, (both guns)

Trunnion Heights - Melford - 45.79 Feet, (both guns)

Copies of the Table of Angles for both Batteries are being forwarded to this Headquarters and will be passed to you at the earliest possible moment.”

This letter confirms the presence of at least four guns in the Canso Strait area!

The final details in the operation of these batteries was completed by the end of September 1941. NDHQ Ottawa reviewed the Tables sent but found small errors. The errors were marginal really. All Ottawa did was to correct the calculations by one decimal place to obtain a higher degree of accuracy in the firing of the guns should they ever be required.<sup>113</sup>

With that correspondence, the final dispositions and workings of the guns appeared to have been closed.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 2-4/23

<sup>114</sup> Ibid dead files 321.009 (D374) AA & Coast Arty, pg. 1/23 (cover sheet file)

## 9 - Troubled Waters

U-boats were always a great concern to those responsible for defending the Canso Strait during the Second World War. There was much activity, and dithering too, as to what could be done attending to that threat. It inevitably boiled down to what to do next, where to establish the defensive positions, and so on. The operational details were well handled, but less so, were those concerning bureaucracy and cost.

The war was an expensive endeavour. And even at the height of the conflict, and as in peace, there were always the inevitable bureaucratic concerns with “associate costs”. It generated the inevitable exercise in what was common amongst Canadian armed forces and those of its allies, the battle of “the allocation of scarce resources”.

Authorities wished to make the minimal investment, while maximizing Canada’s security requirements, as well as getting the most for the bang for the buck. That was found concerning the guns of 86<sup>th</sup> Bty RCA.

There was never any certainty for or guarantee that the guns in the Strait were ever required. That would only become evident should they be called upon to defend the Strait. It was a question then, of how many were minimally required for that purpose. Canada’s plans and preparations were made while managing a certain level of risk.

Risk would have been judged in hindsight, within the purview of public criticism, that would judge those preparations, as either adequate or inadequate; or as too little, too late depending on the outcomes of the actions/inactions of the enemy. In hindsight, they would either have been judged as too costly and wasteful, or as not enough. The circumstances of either action/inaction could not be ignored and demanded some preparations by Canada in anticipation of events.

A suspected U-boat incursion 11 November 1941 brought matters to a head. Although a U-boat was allegedly observed to be lurking at Sydney, the greater fear was that this U-boat had made an incursion deep into its Harbour! The sole incident was close enough to the Canso Strait, that it heightened security for the entire region.

The intensification of events and operational concerns, were clearly evident in a report that stated “At approximately 2050 hours, on 11th November 1941, this Headquarters (Sydney) was notified that there was reason to believe that a submarine had entered the harbor at the same time as a merchant ship. F.C. Post was advised. At 2130 hours, it had been ascertained that a bad reading had been made by the Navy and no submarine had entered.”<sup>115</sup>

Although this report proved false, it brought matters into focus. U-boats were the clear and present danger on Canada’s east coast!

It was interesting, as it was the first observation in the official records of the Canso Defence Area, that a unit took some action regarding a perceived U-boat incursion. It was not to be the last. In fact, U-boat activity on Canada’s east coast was just heating up considerably at this time. This was the prelude to the events of 1942.

Sydney, NS was one of Canada’s ports where convoys formed for movements overseas to Great Britain. Notably, shipping designated as slow convoys were assembled here. Slow convoys consisted of older ships, often recalled or spared from retirement. These ships managed at best a top speed of 8 knots. But often as not, they were incapable of even maintaining that speed.<sup>116</sup> Thus, they were easy targets and attracted the enemy’s interest.

The U-boat was always a constant and persistent threat, that required due diligence, vigilance, and preparation. A constant state of high alert merely in anticipation of this lurking presence had to be maintained. It was very demanding work.

Over time though, the stress of constant high alert, was very tiring and exhausting. With that stress and an apparent lack of action, it was very concerning, as it could easily lead to complacency. There was a hidden potential

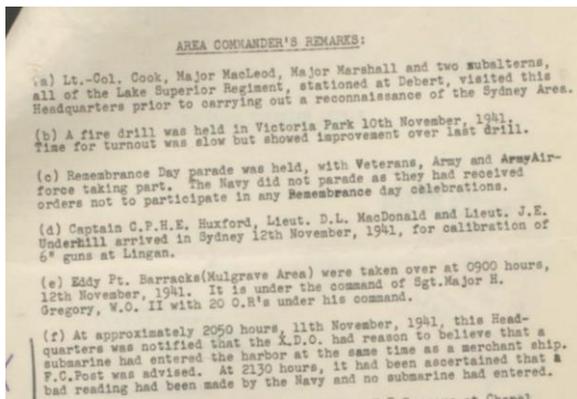
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<sup>115</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, 97 pg. (cover page included), **20th Nov 1941. Weekly Sitrep, App A pg. 2**

<sup>116</sup> Bernard Edwards, **Donitz and the Wolf Packs**, Pen & Sword MARITIME, 1996, pg. 35-36

for disaster if complacency led to the acceptance of undue risk or shortcuts. This was especially true for the coastal defence batteries in and around the East Coast.

The U-boat was a constant and pernicious threat, seldom seen. But behind all military operations, it was often a case of 90% routine and 10% sheer terror! U-boat operations along Canada's east coast highlight some of the issues. It was



Melford Weekly Situation Report 15 Nov 1941, Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFS., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, pg. 4 of 97

hard to sustain a constant state of awareness, vigilance, preparedness and readiness in anticipation of a lurking enemy who did his utmost to hide his intentions to the last moment.

The problem then was boredom. Boredom led to lax practices. Its effects became especially evident in the relaying of information. The November 1941 incident wasn't the first time a U-boat had made its presence known.

There was always a requirement for awareness of U-boat activities. But there also may have been some reluctance to report information for fear of raising false alarms. The failure to make one such report resulted in an admonishment from higher headquarters noted previously.

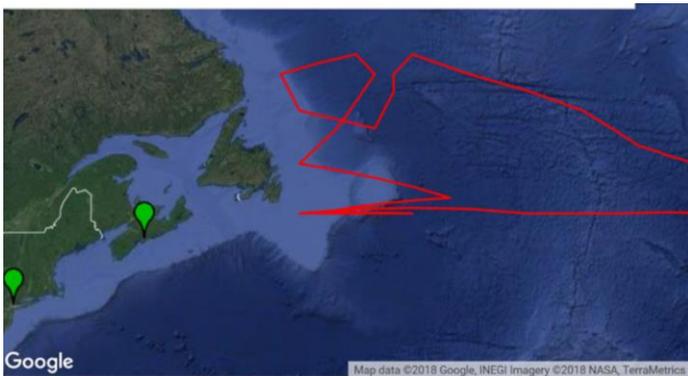
The headquarters at Sydney was deeply concerned with the laxness of 86th Heavy Battery R.C.A. 86<sup>th</sup> Bty was comprised of two troops, one located at Melford and the other at Beacon Point.

Sydney was concerned with the unit's failure to expeditiously report the incident of 9 November. The term used was "Immediately". Their letter concerning the incident, did not elaborate at length on the unit's faults, other than detailing the need for adherence to standard operating procedures in the circumstances.

In the end, this sighting too proved to be a false alarm. Nonetheless, 86<sup>th</sup> Bty should have sent a follow-on report of their sighting immediately, not days after

the event, as it happened in this case. Critically, the incident was only reported some eleven days after the fact, 20 November. It hit the higher headquarters like a bombshell that led to an admonishment for this laxness to report vital information.<sup>117</sup>

The U-boat threat was very real indeed even though their sighting proved false. There were 50 U-boats on war patrol 11 November 1941. None were anywhere near the coast of Nova Scotia on the day though. The closest U-boat to Nova Scotia was U-93 commanded Oblt. Horst Elfe. U-93 was in position at 46.03N, 46.45W, patrolling off Newfoundland, meandering south to north, just on the Continental Shelf.<sup>118</sup> So perhaps, 86<sup>th</sup> Bty's infraction and laxness begs some forgiveness. But lives were at stake!



Source: U-boat Net.com, U93 Patrol.

U-boat operations in 1942 marked the start of the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence; a separate theater in the Battle of the Atlantic. One of the key instruments of that battle was the Type IX U-boat, and its variants, that played a key role. The Type IX was a long-range boat that had remarkable endurance. It was very capable of bringing the naval war well into the heartland of Canada.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 5 of 97

<sup>118</sup> Uboat Net.com, U-93 patrol, [https://www.uboa.net/boats/patrols/patrol\\_4700.html](https://www.uboa.net/boats/patrols/patrol_4700.html), Accessed: 1 Feb 2018

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Morgan & Bruce Taylor, *U-Boat Attack Logs – A Complete Record of Warship Sinkings from Original Sources 1939-1945*, Seaforth Publishing, 2011, pg. xxx

The Type IX was a formidable weapon that generally displaced between 1000-1100 tons surfaced (depending on variant). They had a range of 10500—13850 nautical miles, carried normal weapon loads of 22 torpedoes, with a crew of between 48-56.

The type IX also carried significant deck guns. Its main gun was 105mm that could do considerable damage. It also bristled with two anti-aircraft guns to defend from air attack comprised of 1 x 37mm and 1 x 20mm gun.<sup>120</sup>

It happened that one U-boat, U-518, entered Conception Bay at *Baie des Chaleurs*, 9 November 1942. It was quite conceivable that a separate purpose-built mission could have easily brought the Type IX's close into the industrial areas of Sydney or the Strait of Canso. They never did though, but such a threat was always there, and was very real given the proximity of three boats present in Canadian waters November 1942. Their inadvertent wanderings led to an increased operational tempo in the Gulf of St Lawrence and along Canada's east coast.

In fact, there was considerable activity in 1942 that kept Canada's coastal defence's hopping. All assets, army, air and navy were deeply engaged and directed to thwarting this threat. Twenty-two ships and many lives were lost in what became the "Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence".

Noted historically, "The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, ... 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."<sup>121</sup>

As interesting as the U-boat dispositions of 1942 were, the true impacts to Canada were exacerbated by the United States' entry into the war. A gauntlet was

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid Daniel Morgan & Bruce Taylor, 2011, pg. xxii

<sup>121</sup> Canada, Veterans Affairs, **The peaceful society we enjoy has been created by the efforts and sacrifices of generations of Canadians who have put their lives on the line in the cause of peace and freedom around the world, website** The Battle Of The Gulf Of St. Lawrence, Introduction, 14 Feb 2019  
Source: read:<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war/battle-gulf-st-lawrence/intro>  
Accessed: 4 May 2019

laid down by U-553 that began a campaign commencing 12 May 1942. U-553 entered deep into Canadian waters where its torpedoes sunk the British freighter *Nicoya* just a few kilometres off Anticosti Island. Less than two hours later, U-553 destroyed a ship, the Dutch freighter, *Leto*.<sup>122</sup> U-553 wasn't supposed to be in the Gulf of St Lawrence at all.

U-553 was originally on a patrol line just off Boston where; regrettably and to Canadian misfortune, encountered some engine trouble. The boat changed course and headed northwards, towards what was assumed to be calmer waters, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, to make urgent repairs.<sup>123</sup>

The Kriegsmarine had no plans for incursions into the St Lawrence. U-553's incursion was merely accidental. However, the Kriegsmarine quickly realized an opportunity when it saw one. U-553's attack truly struck at Canada's heartland and morale. It concluded that Canadian military dispositions were lacking, unprepared, and largely disorganized.

Those conclusions seem to be founded. The 86<sup>th</sup> Bty's buried U-boat sighting report lends some credibility given the events of 1942! That report had to be found, filtered, and analyzed. Any intelligence, or strategic or tactical information received, was too late to be of any use or value to countering what may have been an immediate U-boat threat.<sup>124</sup> Such information was vital! The events of October 13, 1942, concerning the ferry *Caribou* illustrates that point.

*Caribou* sailed from Sydney to Port Aux Basques on its regular run. The ferry was attacked on the morning of the fourteenth at 3:40AM. There were 237 souls aboard; 73 were civilians, including 11 children, and 118 military personnel, plus a crew of 46. One hundred and thirty-six perished that night.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Fabrice Mosseray, **The Battle of the St. Lawrence -A Little-Known Episode in the Battle of the Atlantic**, UBoat.Net 1995-2010, 29 Mar 2002.

Source: <http://uboat.net/articles/?article=29>

Accessed: 30 November 2010

<sup>123</sup> Ibid Fabrice Mosseray, 29 March 2002

<sup>124</sup> Ibid file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, pg. 5 of 97

<sup>125</sup> Paul Collins, **Sinking of the Caribou**, ©2006, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site

Source: <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/politics/caribou-sinking.php>

Commented [GM1]:

Nonetheless it was not surprising that many tantalizing targets in and around Canada's east coast also tempted U-boats.

These targets drew them close into Canadian shores. There were other tempting targets other than ships at sea. Those targets included industrial and military facilities and infrastructure along the inland shores. The existence of such temptations, heightened Canada's awareness to a growing security threat.

And it got worse by the day. In the first half of 1942, following the United States' declaration of war on Japan, Germany likewise declared war against them. Germany now fulfilled their obligations under the Tripartite Agreement with Japan and Italy. U-boats were amassed off their coast and the gloves were off.

Germany was no longer contained by "American neutrality". US shipping were now legitimate targets. It opened a hornet's nest that saw an increased U-boat presence and activity off the North American seaboard. It had consequences for Canada as well.

U-boats could just have easily wreaked havoc all along Canada's eastern seaboard, but the Kriegsmarine chose to select and concentrate on the more lucrative targets of US merchant shipping. Sadly, the US failed to employ the lessons learned by Canada and Great Britain to convoying merchant shipping. In fact, they failed to protect their merchant shipping initially. US authorities incorrectly presumed that this shipping was safe from harm and current measures were adequate.

The worst happened. U-boats it was said rode "... on the wave of success unprecedented in the history of sea warfare". Sinkings world wide were three million tons in the first half of 1942.<sup>126</sup> A significant number of that, was sunk off the North American seaboard.

But as the summer wore on, the Americans finally gained the upper hand. Sea and air resources gained control over their coastal waters and a convoy system was finally implemented. The lesson was learned the hard way. U-boats were forced

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Accessed: 3 March 2018

<sup>126</sup> Ibid Edwards, 1996, pg. 74

back out into the Atlantic where they took positions along the North Atlantic convoy routes.<sup>127</sup>

U-boat tactics then were to harry and attack the convoy system all along the Western Approaches for both east and west bound traffic. West bound traffic was attacked until reaching safe waters off Newfoundland.<sup>128</sup>

These tactics suggest that most of the action was to the North and East of Nova Scotia. It's true to an extent as the German Navy concentrated their forces there to do maximum damage. But U-boats ranged far and wide. In fact, on 11 November 1942, there were 128 U-boats on war patrol in various parts of the globe.<sup>129</sup>

It was their concentration first along the US east coast, that eventually led to an incursion into the Gulf of St Lawrence. All began with the engine troubles of U-553 that led to increased activity there. It was the unintended consequence of that trouble, that brought surprise to Canadian defence planners, and an increased danger found in the U-boat presence within Canadian waters.

For example, seven boats were on patrol off Newfoundland, Maritime Canada, and the eastern Coast of the United States. There were several boats placed near or in Canadian waters. U-518 commanded by Oblt. Friedrich-Wilhelm Wissmann was in position at 48.45N, 63.15W, inside the Gulf of St Lawrence, south of Anticosti Island, east of Percé Qc. Notably, U-518 had departed Kiel on 26 Sep 1942 and was at sea 47 days.

U-183 (type IXC/40) commanded by Kptlt. Heinrich Schäfer was in position 44.15N, 63.15W just off the mouth of Halifax. U-183 departed Kiel on 19 Sep 1942 and remained at sea 96 days returning to Kiel, 23 Dec 1942.

U-106 (type IXB) commanded by Kptlt. Hermann Rasch was in position 43.21N, 63.15W south of Nova Scotia, off the Continental Shelf. U-106 departed Lorient on 22 Sep 1942 returning 26 Dec 1942 and was at sea for 96 days.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid Edwards, 1996, pg. 74

<sup>128</sup> Ibid Edwards, 1996, pg. 75

<sup>129</sup> Uboat.net, War, **U-Boats on Patrol this date, 11 November 1942**,

Accessed: 29 January 2018

Source: <https://www.uboa.net/boats/patrols/search.php>



Source: UBoat.net (google maps) 11 November 1942<sup>130</sup>

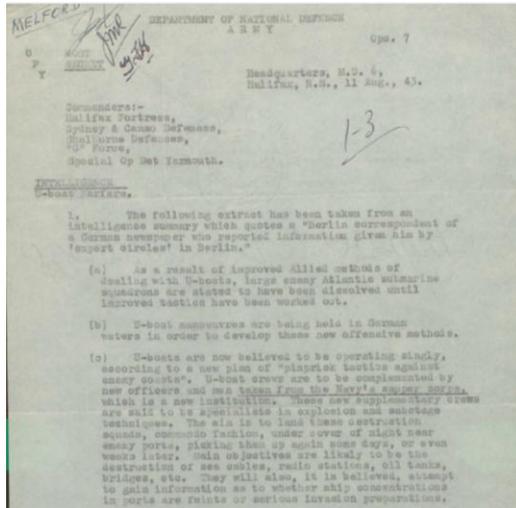
U-518's **patrol** was one of special interest and, one that presented a great danger to Canada. Oblt. Friedrich-Wilhelm Wissmann had relieved Hans-Günther Brachmann on the new type IXC boat U-518 on 19 August 1942. It was Wissmann's first patrol on this new type. Moreover, it was a special mission. Wissmann was tasked to land an agent in North America.

Wissmann departed his home port at Kiel, Germany on 26 Sept 1942 and reached North America at the end of October. U-518 entered Conception Bay on 2 November. Wissmann announced his presence in Canadian waters by sinking 2 vessels (Rose Castle and P.L.M. 27). This likely put his mission in jeopardy; regardless, he successfully landed an enemy agent 9 November 1942 at *Baie des Chaleurs*, in New Brunswick Canada.

Having completed his main mission, Wissmann headed for open waters. Twelve days later he intercepted convoy ON-145. He did further damage by sinking one other ship and damaging two more. His patrol continued and on 23 November he sank one last ship before heading to France. Wissmann, reached his home port on 15 December, completing what was a very successful mission.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid Uboat.net, 11 November 1942

<sup>131</sup> Ibid Uboat.net, 11 November 1942, U-518



From Files Melford Battery, Directorate of History and Heritage. Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 56 of 75

Wissmann operated deep in Canadian waters but other patrols had an impact as well. The patrol of U-106 was of interest. At 1547 hours on 11 Oct 1942, U-106 sighted a British ship, **Waterton** commanded by Master William Lutjens. **Waterton** was in convoy BS-31.

**Waterton** was hit by two torpedoes from U-106 (Type IXB) and sank by the stern north of Cape Breton Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This was close enough to bring alarm to the growing danger of lurking

U-boats in Canadian waters. The master of **Waterton** and 24 crew members and two gunners survived this ordeal. They were fortunate to have been picked up and rescued by **HMCS Vison** commanded by T/Lt W.E. Nicholson, RCNR. The survivors were landed at Sydney.<sup>132</sup>

U-183 (Type IXC/40) had the quieter patrol. It too sunk one ship. This attack happened approximately at 09.49 hours on 3 December 1942. It happened much further away from Nova Scotia's coast line but still well within Canadian waters. The **Empire Dabchick** commanded by Master Philip Edward Birch, OBE was in convoy ONS-146. The **Empire Dabchick** was attacked, torpedoed, and sunk by U-183. The position was about 200 miles southeast of Sable Island, Nova Scotia. The master of **Empire Dabchick**, his crew of 36, and eleven gunners were all lost.<sup>133</sup>

Surprisingly though 1943 proved a much quieter year in the Gulf as the predominant threat was well off-shore, in the Atlantic. It really wasn't until 1944

<sup>132</sup> Ibid Uboat.net, 11 November 1942, U-106

<sup>133</sup> Ibid Uboat.net, 11 November 1942, U-183

that there was a return of the U-boat threat to Sydney, Cape Breton, and the Canso Strait, that there was cause for further concern.

In the meantime, it seemed that the Allied tactics were having some success and effect on German U-boat actions.

Intelligence suggested German U-boat activity in 1943 would be limited to pin prick attacks on Canadian soil.<sup>134</sup> The pressures and direct threats to positions in and around the Canso Defence Area and Cape Breton were relieved somewhat, notwithstanding the intensity in the continuing Battle of the Atlantic.

Apparently, there was another incident of some concern that required unit action. A telegram from 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty to GoC indicated a gun unit was in action 9 May 1944. Their telegram was cryptic and did not provide much detail. On the same day a U-boat incursion was once again alleged to have occurred in Sydney's inner harbour. It seemed that several U-Boats were operating in the area, somewhere between Sydney and the Canso Defence Area.

Beacon Bty was the unit involved in the action that day at 1800 hrs (6pm local). Their telegram was a confirmation of a telephone call detailing the firing of the guns. But the telegram provided little detail on what target was engaged or what precipitated or necessitated this action.<sup>135</sup> It would appear that the lessons learned requiring immediate reporting were well learned after 1942.

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<sup>134</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 56 of 75

<sup>135</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 20 of 75

CLASSES OF SERVICE		TELEGRAPH, CABLE AND RADIO CONNECTIONS TO ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD	
DAY MESSAGES			
DAY LETTERS			
NIGHT MESSAGES			
NIGHT LETTERS			

**GOVERNMENT OF CANADA**  
  
**RADIOTELEGRAPH SERVICE**  
 ADMINISTERED BY  
 DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE—OTTAWA, CANADA

NUMBER	SENT TO	SENT BY	REC'D BY	TIME SENT	TIME FILED	CHECK
						Oct-1600

SEND THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE SUBJECT TO THE TERMS ON THE BACK HEREOF — 9-5-44

*SECRET - IN CIPHER*  
~~OC 16 for Regt Red~~  
 To: Serial 335  
 From: Serial 338  
 RA 193. Confirming call Beacon in action  
 1800 hrs Today STOP. Required three Range  
 Taken 4 gum incumbers just each lost  
 Total 14 Btco

From Files Melford Battery, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 20 of 75

The presence of a U-boat in friendly waters was a significant incident, that demanded immediate follow up with higher headquarters.

The closest U-boat to Nova Scotia on 9 May was U-548 commanded by Oblt Zimmermann. U-548 was off Newfoundland at the time and was no where near Cape Breton. U-548 attacked a Canadian frigate, HMCS Valleyfield

(K 329), at 2335 hrs on 6 May. HMCS Valleyfield was sunk in the early morning hours of 7 May 1944.<sup>136</sup>

Oblt Zimmermann was on his first combat patrol. His mission was a simple one, to monitor weather and to provide reports. At this stage of the war, this alone was a dangerous activity as U-boats were being monitored, located and attacked quickly by those pursuing them. All U-boat transmissions were monitored and triangulated, upon which military aircraft, ships, or both were dispatched to attack. U-548 was lucky and spared disaster. The U-boat that relieved U-548 wasn't so fortunate. U-342 was sunk with all hands aboard on 17 May 1944 shortly after transmitting its first and last weather report.<sup>137</sup>

HMCS Valleyfield wandered into Oblt Zimmermann and U-548's sights during his patrol. HMCS Valleyfield was sunk by a homing torpedo launched by U-548. It was mere bad luck that Valleyfield wandered into U-548's sights. Valleyfield was making headway in company with Edmundston, Frontenac, Giffard and Halifax for St John's Nfld. They made their way through heavy growlers and ice. Radar was ineffective because of prevailing ice conditions. Most importantly, none of the

<sup>136</sup> Ibid U-boat net.com, patrol U-548 9 May 1944

<sup>137</sup> Ibid Morgan and Taylor, 2011, pg. 399

ships deployed their CAT anti-acoustic device to deflect homing torpedoes because it greatly impacted the performance of their ASDIC sonar.

It proved to be a disastrous choice. U-548's torpedo struck Valleyfield amidships breaking its back in two. Seven minutes after striking, Valleyfield sunk below the waves taking with it a total of 125 souls.<sup>138</sup> HMCS Valleyfield's loss was a tragic reminder that continued vigilance all along the eastern seaboard including the Canso Defence Area was required.

Given the disaster and tragedies along the way, often as not, the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence was viewed as an unmitigated defeat on Canadian shores. The Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence remains a little-known or under appreciated event in Canadian History.<sup>139</sup> It may well be that wartime censorship played a role to stifling the story. The expedient view in the post war was to simply ignore it, and leave it best forgotten.<sup>140</sup>

But the reality was the "Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence" was anything but an unmitigated defeat. It was in fact an unknown military victory. The Battle denied the enemy control over Canadian littoral waters. This victory was largely due to a combined arms effort of the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force, and Canadian Army in which the Canso Defence Area played a part. It was hard fought with great sacrifice, and it took a toll, as well as the combined effort of all of Canada's armed forces to win it.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid Morgan and Taylor, 2011, pg. 399-401

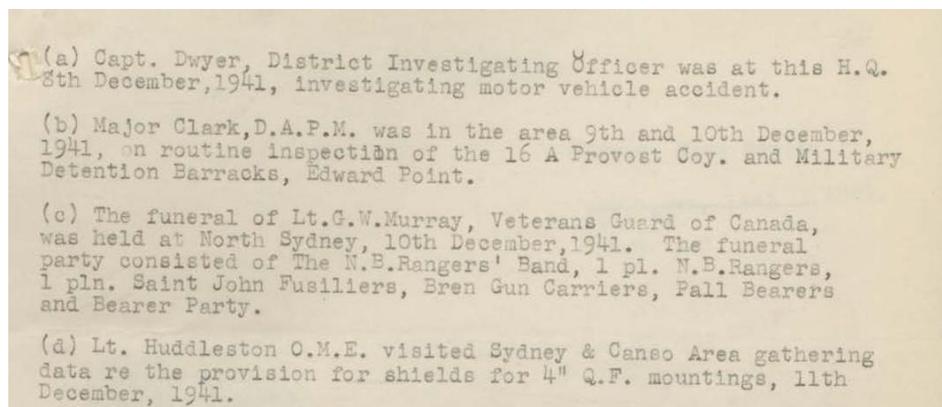
<sup>139</sup> Roger Sarty, **The "Battle We Lost at Home" Revisited Official Military Histories and the Battle of the St. Lawrence**, Canadian Military History, Volume 12, Numbers 1& 2, Winter/Spring 2003, pg. 41

<sup>140</sup> Sarty, 2003, pg 42

## 10 - 1942 Greatcoats on – Greatcoats off

The year 1941 ended tragically in the Canso Defence Area. Lt. G.W. Murray, Veteran's Guard of Canada, while inspecting facilities at Edward Point, was killed in an automobile accident, 8 December 1941. His funeral was held a few short days later, at North Sydney, 10 December. There were no other details provided on the cause of this accident. His wasn't the first fatal accident, and it surely wouldn't be the last! <sup>141</sup>

Young Lt Murray's death occurred one short day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, where devastation rained down on the United States Navy's Pacific Fleet. Their attack ended United States' neutrality, galvanized a nation to action, and changed the face and balance of the war from that day on!



The end of 1941 set in motion actions toward a pivotal point in the war that brought an influence into the Canso Defence Area and elsewhere. The United States attacked by Japan, at Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941, formally declared war twenty-four hours later 8 December. Pearl Harbor profoundly affected the psyche of a nation that mobilized it for war.

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<sup>141</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, 97 pg. (cover page included), Pg. 17 of 97

The United States now joined with Great Britain and its Allies, in a common cause to defeat their enemies. With that declaration, the United States brought its vast industrial base, that was much needed, to bear arms against those enemies. It also brought an expansion of its armed forces in a rapid mobilization to achieve the necessary power to do so.

The desirable impacts of these expansions were not felt at the outset. It would only have a great impact later, as it was all untried, untested and new. It still had to be developed. In the meantime, the odds remained in the enemies' favour until the weight of the United States' industrial and military power coalesced as a unified force.

All this brought great change in world events. It was an action that intensified the war all along Canada's east coast as well as that of the United States.

1942 was to be a year of change in the Canso Defence Area, marked by several major unit transfers that were brought about by the changing strategic shifts in the war. It was evident through various coordinating instructions for the improvement of security in the Canso Strait area. The impetus for change was likely precipitated by events in the United States, Pacific, and Far East.

There was a necessary shifting of forces to re-balance resources that met the growing threats between the "Atlantic" and "Pacific" theatres of operations. As such, these changes likely had an impact that saw various unit rotations amongst all the armed services both at home and abroad.

Canadian Army HQ Sydney and Canso Defences issued instructions on 28 Jan 1942 in anticipation of the opening of the Strait area. So 1942 began with all units receiving instructions concerning operational readiness. These instructions highlighted performance of duties that would be required therein.

Their instruction essentially specified that all men would carry arms in the local area. All must be prepared to defend or repulse the enemy at any time or place. This was defined within the limits of the scale of equipment at the time. These limits suggest that there were still some shortages. Regardless, units were then

responsible for their own means of defence and were required to move at a moment's notice.<sup>142</sup>

Pearl Harbor may have emboldened the enemy to act at a point of our greatest dislocation and weakness. This required increased vigilance all along our coast lines. The U-boat campaign of 1942 and the attempted landing of saboteurs or agents on Canada's east coast are evidence of that. But life went on while waiting for the worse. And with that, life and war brought inevitable change.

1942 proved to be a busy one in the Canso Defence Area, especially for the Halifax Rifles and 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Battery. The Halifax Rifles had by this time replaced the Pictou Highlanders. The Highlanders were disbanded 31 December 1940 and then, called out on active service the next day, 1 January 1941.<sup>143</sup>

86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty was left unaffected. It would not move. But it would be affected by change. 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty received specific direction for immediate action drills that were to be adhered to. There were also coordinating instructions for collaborative action with the search light batteries. There were increasing concerns with enemy incursions by air and new potential enemy capabilities.<sup>144</sup> These concerns were the potential for unreported and unidentified aircraft over-flights.<sup>145</sup> These were the broader issues underlying this instruction.

The searchlights were under control of the respective Battery Commander's at Beacon Point and Melford as part of the 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Battery's (RCA) order of battle. There were some problems with the search lights in their sundry operations that had to be resolved immediately. The searchlights interfered with and blinded the normal night operations of the examination vessels (RCN) then operating in the

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<sup>142</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 42 of 75

<sup>143</sup> Canada, National Defence, The Nova Scotia Highlanders – Regimental History, A-DH-267-000/AF-003, pg. 2-2-166

<sup>144</sup> Manfred Griebel, Luftwaffe over America – The Secret Plans to Bomb the United States in World War II, Greenhill Books, 2004, 256 pg.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 42 of 75

Strait of Canso. These difficulties were outlined in a letter of complaint from Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences to the Coastal Defence Batteries, 1 December 1941.<sup>146</sup>

These longstanding complaints emanated from the RCN, dated back to 28 November 1941. The RCN advised that their personnel were blinded by the operations of the lights, when navigating through the strait at night.<sup>147</sup> The OC Coastal Defence Batteries was ordered to rectify the problem. But nothing was done in that regard until January 1942! Apparently, the operation of the lights was a festering sore and a lingering problem for a good long time!

An early attempt to resolve the problems with the search lights was made. Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences replied to the RCN in a letter. Coincidentally Sydney replied the same day they received the RCN complaint, 28 November 1941. The letter read in part:

“I am directed to refer to A.C. S. 10-2-3 dated 22nd August 1941, in which your attention was drawn to A.C.S. 10-10 dated 9th November 1940, outlining instructions regarding the exposure of search lights...

2. In this connection I am to draw your attention to the necessity of using every care so that no blinding of ship's personnel on the bridge will take place during recognition.

3. I am further to point out that unless there is any reason for suspicion, the observation light should only establish the fact that a ship is there, as the sentry beam will pick it up in turn.”<sup>148</sup>

The searchlight batteries were a target for criticism and as such were in a no-win situation. They were responsible for identifying and locating ships in their area but were now prevented from doing so for that purpose.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 3 of 75.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 5 of 75.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 5 of 75.

The staff direction was a two-edge sword. If an attack occurred on their watch and the lights failed to respond, they would be in serious breach and dereliction of their duty.

The RCN's point was understandable as well. They were navigating in tight quarters, blinding them at an inopportune time could easily lead to disaster. So better coordination was indeed required, but given the technology available at the time, coordination was most likely exceedingly difficult and problematic to achieve.

It was hoped that the situation would be resolved by instructions given prior to 15 January 1941. Still, there was some doubt that that specific instruction resolved the matter to everyone's full satisfaction.

The lights were now to be employed by shining vertically before tracking on a target. This was a dubious course of action for it identified a friendly location and position to an enemy who could easily counter it as necessary. The instructions given, were geared principally to aircraft recognition, not for the needs of examination services though.<sup>149</sup> Nothing was stated about ships in conjunction with this plan. It was left to local authority to sort out the working details.

There were at least two searchlights at each battery position. One was the main light and the other, a standby unit. The stand by light was only used if the main light was fully engaged, otherwise it remained unlit.

No method was given toward ship recognition and the RCN in this instruction. But it may have been agreed to and worked out locally in this manner. The main light was to be lit, then directed vertical. The vertical light may have been the signal to those on the bridge watch to take measures to protect their night vision. Some short time later the standby light was directed on the ship to confirm its identity. But there was nothing procedurally on file to suggest that this was more than an ad hoc arrangement.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 2 of 75.

But the searchlight problem does highlight some difficulties and problems that beset the commanders and units responsible for safeguarding the Canso Defence Area.

The further issuance of operational orders and instructions remained relatively quiet until 3 April 1942. The record indicates that the OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty acknowledged receipt of the new instruction immediately on 4 April.<sup>150</sup> This operation order was a lengthy one, but it did not directly affect the OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty, other than as a courtesy in the notification of new unit arrangements.

The instruction issued 3 April 1942, as Operational Order 12, was essentially a movement order. The Irish Regiment of Canada replaced the Halifax Rifles as the unit responsible for the defence of the Strait of Canso and the fortress therein.<sup>151</sup>

It was a coordinated effort that began with the movement of an advance party of the Irish Regiment of Canada, 3 April 1942. The Halifax Rifles were then rotated out of the Strait commencing with the move of their own advance party completed 4 April.

The unit rotation was completed by 7 April 1942 with briefings, a handover of all responsibilities, equipment, etc. that was required for the Strait of Canso defence. New faces replaced the current serving Infantry unit in the area, and as always, the new faces came either with a new or a continuing set of problems.

The continuing set of problems likely lay in the chain of command as well as command and control in the Canso Defence Area. The recent change of command left a void in corporate knowledge on how it was supposed to work. It was an opportunity for some to distance themselves from the current command and control structure that led to reminders and re-issuance of instruction in that regard later!

The troops stationed in the Canso Defence Area had to maintain a high state of readiness to meet any eventuality and every contingency especially in 1942. That was often difficult for the reality of war often seemed to be elsewhere.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 43 of 75

<sup>151</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 44-46 of 75

The men were kept on their toes by constant drilling and training to maintain that readiness. There was an annual training plan put in to effect towards that end.

On 3 June 1942, Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences issued ammunition allotments to the various OC's of its Coast Defence Batteries. These allotments were to be used for coastal defence practices in 1942/43. Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences subsequently demanded unit plans for this ammunition as well as their plans in the conduct of unit training.<sup>152</sup>

Unfortunately, the batteries were provided with sub-calibre ammunition with which to conduct this training and practices. Regardless, Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences placed certain demands on the units to ensure quality. The units were trained to a high pitch.

The key to success of training though was a final assessment conducted by the senior artillery officer. The final assessment of unit training was not left to the units' own devices. The scrutiny of their training was under the very watchful eyes of the Instructor Gunner (IG). The IG was tantamount to God Almighty to the gunners, a man who could easily make or break careers. The IG was a man to be feared, who set the very highest of standards given the importance of the guns and need for accuracy in their employment. They would adjust their training schedules to accommodate the review by the IG RCSA.<sup>153</sup>

Each OC provided Headquarters Sydney & Canso Defences with their key test dates that were forwarded to the IG RCSA for two purposes. The first was to ensure that the IG RCSA was available on-site on a day for the review of the conduct of the artillery practices. Second, authorities had to have time to arrange the tow boats necessary for their target practice.

The correspondence of July and August 1942 concerned the final administrative details for the annual qualification and firing practices. Final arrangements were made between 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty and the RCN.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg.6-7 of 75

<sup>153</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 6 of 75

A letter dated 31 July 1942 from 16<sup>th</sup> Coast Regiment RCA Sydney to OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coastal Bty, agreed to these arrangements.

16<sup>th</sup> Coast Regiment RCA, a companion unit, advised should the practice on the agreed to dates Tuesday 4 August 1942 be delayed for any reason, it was to be re-scheduled two weeks later. Until that test, the units followed a normal routine until then at which time the annual practices and qualifications would occur.<sup>154</sup>

Preceding the artillery qualifications and firing practice, Operational Order 8 was issued by Major HH Trimble A/Brigade Major, Sydney and Coast On 11 July 1942. Operational Order 8 cancelled and replaced all other orders.

Operational Order 8 was essentially a reiteration of existing op orders but with new instructions and detail. But suffice to say this order, once issued, was there to address a burr under the saddle, as it stated, "The Senior Combatant officer will command the Mulgrave garrison."

The issuance of these instructions under A/Brigade Major, Sydney and Coast became once again an opportunity to question local authority in the matter of "command and control" of the guns. The senior combatant officer at Sydney responsible for the entire area; including Canso Defence Area and Mulgrave, was a gunner! Consequently, the gunner in the Canso Defence Area likely looked to Sydney for his direction. Again though, it was the senior combatant officer in Mulgrave who was directly responsible for local defence, an infanteer.

There was nothing on file that directly pointed to this as problematic. But it was. All the operation orders contained a statement "The Senior Combatant officer will command the Mulgrave garrison" as if to reinforce or reiterate that fact. It did little to limit the questioning and so, had to be clarified and corrected after the fact constantly. This was patently visible in the constant modifications of the text, over numerous operation orders, found in the inordinate number of strike outs, then penciling of "Infantry officer" over "senior combatant officer" in what was, a constant effort to clarify the point.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 21 of 75

We have no idea why this instruction was written in this way. After all it was not a new issue. It had been corrected many times along the way. Why was it left as is? There were probably many reasons; intra-service rivalry is one that comes directly to mind, but the answer likely lies in the wiggle room afforded to the Senior combatant officer.

The instructions were loosely defined so the senior combatant officer could assume command immediately should the situation warrant it. But left as is, it frayed nerves and exasperated all left to live and deal with it daily! So, Lt Col RC Clark Commanding Officer of the incoming Irish Regiment of Canada at McNair's point, finally issued his own Operation order No 1 dated 28 August 1942.

Lt Col Clark essentially re-published the prior Op order he received verbatim and issued these as instructions to the units under his command. The salient difference though was in the specification of tasks and setting of his dispositions in achieving his mission and tasks in relation to orders that he received. Lt Col Clark worked out his tactical position and was in the process of reorganizing his dispositions.

Lt Col Clark contended with an updated threat assessment in what he had to guard against and prepare for. Intelligence reports suggested that the enemy's scale of attack amounted to the potential for the employment of capital ships, one or two cruisers, merchant raiders, and submarines.

These op orders also contained details about landing parties and strengths, that were broken down and expanded upon in some depth. Potential air attack was also mentioned but nothing was stated specifically, in any detail or great depth. The information, no matter however miniscule, was useful in Lt Col Clark's planning.

This is all very suggestive. It may have been a measure of the relative strength and weakness of intelligence at this stage of the war. Lt Col Clark had to consider more than that. He also had to consider the dispositions of his own forces even down to the smallest element.

One such element was the RCASC Det. 6 Coy. Det. 6 was stated clearly in this order. This unit was garrisoned in Mulgrave proper, and responsible for:

1. Supply petrol, lubricants, and rations,

2. The operation of ambulances between regimental aid posts and military hospital, and
3. The provision of additional transport as required.

The real value of Lt Col Clark's operation order was to the identification, placement, and disposition of friendly forces in the Canso Strait Area. Notwithstanding the change of units and rotation, the locations of the major and minor units and roles were given and lasted for the duration of the war.

Figure 1 – General Dispositions and Defence Area Boundary



Regrettably despite Lt Col Clark's hard work, his preparations and plans were about to be disrupted. His unit was about to be caught up in the changing tide of war in the ebb and flow of unit rotations.

Lt Col Clark received an order , 5 September 1942. It came as a surprise to he and the men of his unit. It was a quick, and possibly, an unexpected order. It was a movement order for the relief of the Irish Regiment of Canada! The IRoC was to be replaced by the Fusiliers du St Laurent, 7 September 1942. The IRoC stay in the Canso Defence Area, was to say the least, very brief indeed.<sup>155</sup>

It was interesting to observe though, that the many adjustments and moves made during 1942, followed the entry of the United States as a belligerent in the war.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 51-53 of 75

The next step for the IROc was clear, a movement order. Lt Col Clarke issued his Operational Order 2 on 5 September. The IROc moved to Debert and then were replaced by the Fusiliers du St Laurent 7 September.<sup>156</sup>

The move was made by train and in several phases. The CNR provided ten day coaches, and one first class coach, to move 20 Officers and 529 men. The main body was moved 7 September. An evening meal was provided.

The main body's move was preceded by an advance party of 3 officers and 20 men. The advance party left Mulgrave earlier on 5 September on regularly scheduled train service. They departed at 1145hrs in the morning on CNR regular service Train #6, making changes in Truro and then departing for Debert to arrive 1757 hrs that day.

The main group departed Mulgrave at 1730hrs on 7 September 1942, arriving at Debert at 2315 hrs the same day. This was a special train. The trip took only 3 hrs and 45 minutes at which point the IROc's duty at Mulgrave was concluded in the Strait area. But with all the comings and goings, and changes ,it required flexibility and patience reflected in the military maxim "Greatcoats on -Greatcoats off" !

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg.54-55 of 75

## 11 - 1942 Tensions Mount

A blizzard struck the Canso Strait area 29 January 1942, that made conditions hazardous and challenging for the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC). The RCASC was responsible for supplying and provisioning of the army posted there. But it also had a duty and responsibility for other Canadian Forces stationed in the area. The unit was the principle centre for victualling, transport, and other support for all naval and air force units stationed there as well.

The storm was a massive one that caused delays and difficulties in re-supplying these outlying units. One unit's ration truck did not move for two days. It was noted in situation reports that a distant post only had three days' emergency rations on hand. The unit in question was never mentioned specifically, but it certainly was noted as an outpost, and not in the Mulgrave/Port Hastings area. It was quite possible that this unit was the Royal Canadian Air Force, No 5 Radar Unit, at Coles Harbour, Guysborough Co.<sup>157</sup>

No 5 Radar Unit received its rations and other supplies from the Army located at Mulgrave. Personal histories from RCAF members stationed there mentioned several problems with rations received from Mulgrave. A personal memoir by Sgt Mickey Stevens also recounts the problems; of dreadful weather, terrible road conditions, and the revolt concerning "Hardtack".

Sgt Stevens recounts an amusing tale of emergency rations sent to No 5 RCAF Radar Unit by the Army. It turned out to be one continuous supply of hardtack. The first was not well received by RCAF personnel to say the least. Regardless, the offering was tolerated given the exigencies of war and rationing.

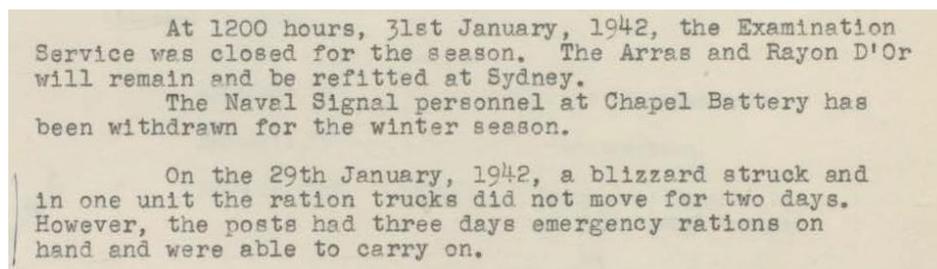
A second offering of "hardtack" followed shortly thereafter. It seemed that the Army was intent on offloading its supply of hardtack onto its RCAF brethren. The second "helping" was received in utter disgust. Offending hardtack was used as missiles, and launched off the resupply truck by disgruntled RCAF personnel, all along the way, back to camp. It was scattered widely all along the wayside and was visible to the station Commanding Officer who was out and about on a duty run. He was angry too, not with the actions of his personnel but with the RCASC. A

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<sup>157</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, 97 pg. (cover page included), Pg. 39 of 97

quick trip to Mulgrave and a blistering interview with the army leadership put paid to any further allotment of hardtack for No 5 RCAF Radar unit.

The other notable event towards the close of January 1942 lies with the RCN examination services. The weekly Sitrep for 3 February detailed the events of 29 January as well as the pending Examination Service closure, 31 January:



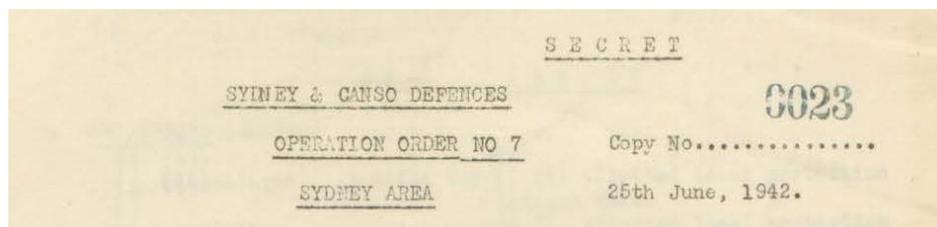
At 1200 hours, 31st January, 1942, the Examination Service was closed for the season. The Arras and Rayon D'Or will remain and be refitted at Sydney. The Naval Signal personnel at Chapel Battery has been withdrawn for the winter season.

On the 29th January, 1942, a blizzard struck and in one unit the ration trucks did not move for two days. However, the posts had three days emergency rations on hand and were able to carry on.

Apart from the impacts of the blizzard to local logistics, resupply and transport, the one bright light was that the examination service was to be closed at 1200hrs 31 Jan 1942. Effectively this closure reduced administrative burden and requirements for support services for a time at least. It also meant that the Strait was now ice bound and unnavigable for the winter months.

The Canso Defence Area's immediate operational threat and tempo were low. This meant that the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA) and other army units then guarding these approaches could be relieved from duty, given some leave, and assigned elsewhere or trained until the next season.

The range of duties and number of personnel assigned to supporting the Canso Defence Area are detailed in a report, 25 Jun 1942:<sup>158</sup>



SECRET

SYDNEY & CANSO DEFENCES

OPERATION ORDER NO 7

SYDNEY AREA

0023  
Copy No.....  
25th June, 1942.

<sup>158</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D125), Aug 42 to Oct 43 Vol 2, pg. 3-5/15

(f) Fortress Troops at Sydney

- (i) R.C.E. - 3rd Fort. Coy. - less detachment
- (ii) R.C.C.S. - No. 5 Coy. A. C. Signals, - less detachment
- (iii) R.C.A.S.C. - Detachment 6th Coy.
- (iv) R.C.A.M.C. - Sydney Mil. Hospital Installation
- (v) C. P. C. - No. 38 Prov. Coy.
- (vi) R.C.O.C. - Detachment O.M.E. Workshop
- (vii) R.C.A.F. - Sec. C.A.C. (Reserve Airport)

(iii) Protect military property.

(b) R. C. A. S. C.

- (i) Distribution S.A.A. from local reserve.
- (ii) Supply petrol, lubricants and rations.
- (iii) Operate ambulances between R.A.P.'s and S.M.H.I.
- (iv) Provide additional transport as required.

(c) R.C.A.M.C.

The RCASC unit in the area was Det 6<sup>th</sup> Coy stationed at Sydney with elements in Mulgrave responsible for:

1. Distribution of small arms ammunition (S.A.A.) from local reserve.
2. Supplying petrol, lubricants and rations.
3. Operation of ambulances, and
4. Provision of additional transport as required.

It was probably a very wise thing to wind things down a bit. There were extreme difficulties in operating in winter conditions in the Strait Area as seen in a report dated 10 Feb 1942:<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 41 of 97:

2. ARMAMENT AND EQUIPMENT

199 Shell 6" A.P., 199 Fuzes Base, large #11 shipped to Ordnance Officer, Halifax, N.S. on 2nd February, 1942.

No. 1 Mounting, Lingan Battery, out of action 4-2-42 until 1100 hours, 5-2-42. Ice formed between roller ring and lower carriage. Cleared by blow torches.

The Lingan Battery was put out of action for about 24 hours simply because of the accretion of ice on the guns. Despite the winter wind down, there was still a requirement to remain vigilant and prepared even with a reduce manning level, in spite of the weather!

On 5 February 1942, the worst happened near the Canso Strait area, that was close enough nonetheless:

A report has already been sent forward on the disturbance on the S.S. Caribou on the 5th February, 1942.

The ferry SS Caribou out of North Sydney on its run to Port aux Basques, Newfoundland was torpedoed and sunk. The sinking of SS Caribou occurred just as certain restrictions were removed by the Kreigsmarine "With the entry of the United States into the war..." . This event was preceded January 12, 1942 when Dönitz unleashed Operation *Paukensschlag* on North America's East coast.

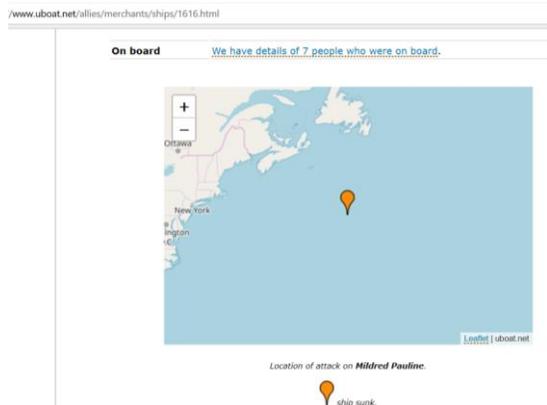
During this campaign, Reinhard Hardegan, commander of U-123, sunk the British steamer *Cyclops* approximately 100 miles southeast of Cape Sable, Nova Scotia. *Cyclops* was not the only vessel sunk that close to home. The Schooner Mildred Pauline of R.W. Sainthill & Co, North Sydney NS was sunk by naval gunfire from U-136 in the North Atlantic.<sup>160</sup>

It happened at 01.33 hours on 8 May 1942, that the unescorted and unarmed **Mildred Pauline**, captained by Master Abram George Thornhill, was shelled and sunk by U-136. U-136 delivered a blistering 102 rounds from its deck gun. The Mildred Pauline was sunk about 425 miles southeast of Nova Scotia. U-136 had previously missed its target with a torpedo at 00.20 hours, so its commander,

<sup>160</sup> [Roger Litwiller -Canadian Naval Author/Historian](#)

#OTD 7/5/1942 #RememberRCN -Schooner Mildred Pauline

Heinrich Zimmermann, took Mildred Pauline with his deck guns. There were no survivors from her crew of 7.<sup>161</sup>



Source: Uboat.Net

So, units in the Canso Defence Area were very well aware of the increased danger, operational tempo, and the activity of the enemy.<sup>162</sup>



SS Caribou, ca. 1920s - 1940s The North Sydney to Port-aux-Basques passenger ferry SS Caribou was sunk by the German submarine U-69 on 14 October 1942.

Photographer unknown. Reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections (Coll. 115 16.07.002), Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL.<sup>161</sup>

The loss of the SS Caribou was particularly poignant for those serving in the Canso Area. Caribou had other uses apart from being a ferry. It was used for minor ice breaking; for example, in clearing a channel through the Harbour at Sydney in February 1942 as described in the following excerpt:

<sup>161</sup> Uboat.Net, Canadian Sailing Ship, Mildred Pauline

<sup>162</sup> Stephen J. Thorne, **Reinhard Hardegen, Last of the U-boat aces**, Legion Magazine, 11 Jul 2018

Source: [https://legionmagazine.com/en/2018/07/reinhard-hardegen-last-of-the-u-boat-aces/?utm\\_source=Cyberimpact&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=The-Fight-for-Italy--75th-Anniversary](https://legionmagazine.com/en/2018/07/reinhard-hardegen-last-of-the-u-boat-aces/?utm_source=Cyberimpact&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=The-Fight-for-Italy--75th-Anniversary)

Accessed: 12 July 2018

The harbour is not yet frozen over. There is some ice in the harbour arms, however. The Northwest Arm has loose drift ice and the South Arm is filled with thin rotten ice. The channel is clear from North Bar to the mouth of the harbour. The Arras and Rayon D'Or were brought from North Sydney to Sydney on Monday, 9th February, 1942. The S.S. Caribou broke a channel for them.

The Caribou was used to shift thin loose drift ice from the Northwest Arm to the South Arm, thus clearing a channel free of ice from North Bar to the mouth of the Harbour. Two ships, Arras and Rayon D'Or were brought from North Sydney to Sydney on Monday 9 May 1942 out through a path that S.S. Caribou broke for them.<sup>163</sup> SS Caribou was well known to those serving in the Strait area.

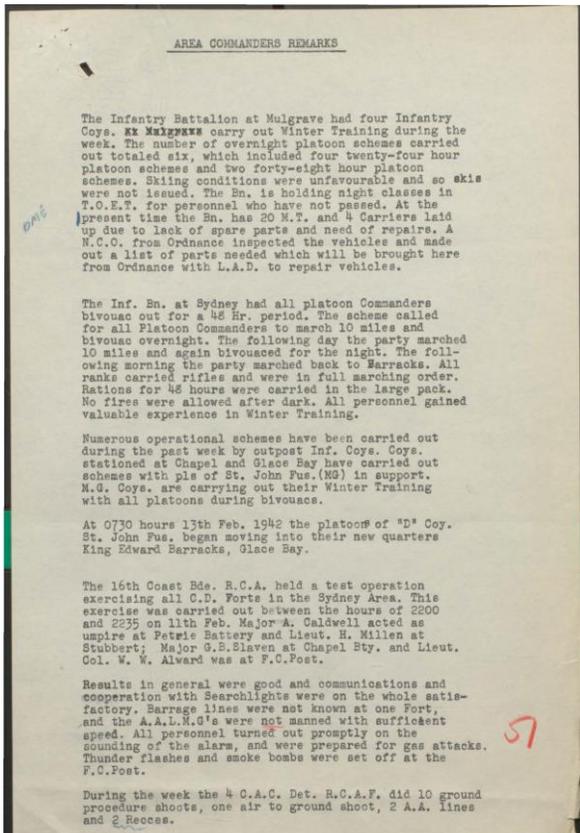
By the end of January considering operational downtime in the Strait, an opportunity presented itself to the army. It went on a comprehensive training program to hone and develop military skills.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 42-44 of 97

<sup>164</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 45 of 97

Remarks found from the situation report of 18 Feb 1942, highlights those actions and goals:



There was no real downtime in the Canso Defence Area. Military commanders had to maintain a degree of operational readiness. The problem with such maintenance lies in the perception of a viable threat.

The ice bound Canso Strait seemed to present little local threat, significant enough to warrant keeping the troops honed and on their toes to a high fevered pitch. And yet, the sinking of SS Caribou was still a very recent memory. So, this honing and pitch were still required.

The means of honing were conducted in other ways through various training schemes. Thus, time spent in

the Area over the winter months, was not a picnic or an easy leisurely walk in the park.

The winter training in 1942 was of considerable benefit to units who would be transferred overseas later, and who fought through Italy or Northwest Europe. They would at least have had the experience of winter training and of operations in inclement weather. The harsh conditions in the Canso Strait area certainly prepared them for what was to come in Italy and North West Europe in 1943-45!

There most likely was much noise associated with this training that may have elevated civilian concern and stress. The Army's activities weren't merely

confined to range shoots. There were active exercises involving significant forces outside the boundaries of normal ranges, especially those of the 4 Canadian Armoured Corps (C.A.C.) and RCAF 10 ground procedure shoots. These involved, one air to ground shoot and two anti-aircraft exercises. There were also active reconnaissance's on the ground that would have given the locals an impression of imminent invasion for sure!

Training activity and troop movements continued in the area throughout the months of February and March 1942. The early part of February was noted for a lack of snow. The lack of snow may have reduced the value of "winter" training somewhat. But significant effort was made in maneuvering, fire and movement, and bivouacking conducted all over this defence area, again leaving the impression that the Canso Defence Area was an armed camp, which it was indeed.

But there was always a requirement to be on guard and prepared for active service. On 11 March 1942, written in the weekly situation report: <sup>165</sup>

ARMAMENT AND EQUIPMENT

Bring to round, fired, at Chapel Bty., on S.S. Kyle, 8-3-42.

A gun was brought to bear and fired on a ship to attract its attention. The ship failed to respond to a naval challenge that certainly heightened a level of concern and excitement. Was it an enemy vessel? It was a question now of shoot first and ask questions later. Still proprieties had to be observed. The offensive ship received a shot over the bow rather than being blown out of the water outright.

It became necessary to clearly identify a ship before such drastic measures were taken. The RCN's reaction and recommendations are found below: <sup>166</sup>

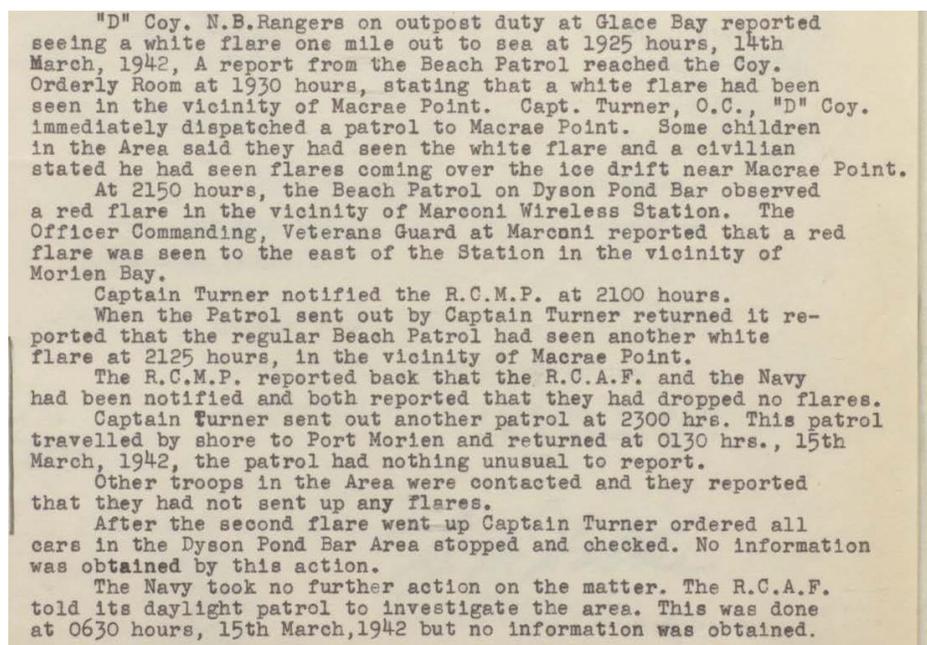
The Navy will endeavor to obtain the sound and colored rockets required for the warning signals. The necessary instructions would be given vessels before they enter the harbour.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 53 of 97

<sup>166</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, pg. 54 of 97

The ship most likely did not use the appropriate recognition colours of the day. Consequently, the battery fired a warning shot across its bow to stop it, failing that, the battery most likely would have engaged it as a hostile target!

One senses a need for a heightened awareness of security during the spring of 1942. There was the "Case of the Mysterious Flares" 14 March, that was an example of that concern. This incident indicated that there was some perceived threat in the area. Everyone, military and civilian were on their toes. Another incident soon followed in close succession. Unknown and suspicious activity was recorded 18 March as:<sup>167</sup>



"D" Coy. N.B. Rangers on outpost duty at Glace Bay reported seeing a white flare one mile out to sea at 1925 hours, 14th March, 1942. A report from the Beach Patrol reached the Coy. Orderly Room at 1930 hours, stating that a white flare had been seen in the vicinity of Macrae Point. Capt. Turner, O.C., "D" Coy. immediately dispatched a patrol to Macrae Point. Some children in the Area said they had seen the white flare and a civilian stated he had seen flares coming over the ice drift near Macrae Point. At 2150 hours, the Beach Patrol on Dyson Pond Bar observed a red flare in the vicinity of Marconi Wireless Station. The Officer Commanding, Veterans Guard at Marconi reported that a red flare was seen to the east of the Station in the vicinity of Morien Bay. Captain Turner notified the R.C.M.P. at 2100 hours. When the Patrol sent out by Captain Turner returned it reported that the regular Beach Patrol had seen another white flare at 2125 hours, in the vicinity of Macrae Point. The R.C.M.P. reported back that the R.C.A.F. and the Navy had been notified and both reported that they had dropped no flares. Captain Turner sent out another patrol at 2300 hrs. This patrol travelled by shore to Port Morien and returned at 0130 hrs., 15th March, 1942, the patrol had nothing unusual to report. Other troops in the Area were contacted and they reported that they had not sent up any flares. After the second flare went up Captain Turner ordered all cars in the Dyson Pond Bar Area stopped and checked. No information was obtained by this action. The Navy took no further action on the matter. The R.C.A.F. told its daylight patrol to investigate the area. This was done at 0630 hours, 15th March, 1942 but no information was obtained.

Once again, this incident was quickly followed by another 21 March, that was subsequently reported, 25 March 1942 as:<sup>168</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 57 of 97

<sup>168</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 60 of 97

Incident at Beacon Bty.

The sentry posted at No. 4 light at Beacon Bty. heard a noise in the bushes near his beat at 2345 hours, 21 March 1942. He fired six shots at what he thought was a man. Further investigation disclosed tracks of a man and a dog in the snow which faded out in a short distance on bare ground. It is not known whether the tracks were there before the shooting or not.

The war was getting deadly serious at this point and sentries were nervous. This report does not state what actions were taken to first challenge the intruder. The common hail "was stand and be recognized" ...we must assume that this was applied as the sentry was a trained soldier.

Ignoring this serious challenge was a grave mistake on the dog walker's part that could have easily proven fatal. Reading between the lines, someone failed to acknowledge the challenge and simply ran away. The soldier fired six shots probably a clip from a standard .303 Lee Enfield rifle. It was dark and the rounds had no effect. If there was a man and a dog out there, they were lucky to be alive indeed. But it was the potential actions of a larger force of men, that were of great concern to local security.

No 4 light at Beacon Battery was a very important target. The enemy would most likely try and neutralize it first before ever landing a small unit in force. The light was there to illuminate any target, especially a lurking U-boat, so the guns could engage such a target if identified.

The forecasted method of attack was perceived as a U-boat discharging a small raiding force on our shores. So, any untoward activity in and around these targets was likely considered an unfriendly act, especially at 2345 hrs at night! It may have been a case of "shoot first – ask questions later" too!

But these two incidents also point to the fact that something was up in March 1942. That "something" was to become significant and about to begin, and became known as "The Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence"!

Perhaps in anticipation of either coming events or what was anticipated, was the need for ample supplies of ammunition. The 8 April Sitrep raised this interesting point:

32448 rounds received on 30-3-42  
for Chapel and Stubberts Batteries.

81120 rounds received on 4-4-42  
for F.C.Post, Lingan, Petrie, South Bar and Edward Batteries.

There were over 113.5 thousand rounds of ammunition stored at the batteries, quite the formidable supply of ammunition indeed!<sup>169</sup>

Regardless, it was all about to change, April 1942. Despite all the preparations and anticipation, the Canso Defence Area would soon welcome some new units.

Two changes of command were forthcoming:

The Irish Regiment of Canada relieved the Halifax Rifles at Mulgrave, completing the move at 1830 hours, 7th April, 1942. The remainder of the week was spent in becoming oriented. The officers made their reconnaissances and training was limited to route marches, pioneer work in the camp area and overhauling of vehicles.

The 20 Recce Bn. (16/22 Sask Horse) relieved the New Brunswick Rangers completing the move at 1830 hours, 10th April, 1942. The remainder of the week was spent settling down and making reconnaissances of the area.

Fresh blood was now posted in the area and with it, came a learning curve.<sup>170</sup>

Their welcome was made interesting by the provocative sighting of some unknown aircraft shortly after their arrival, near Louisbourg.

An unidentified aircraft sighting, 20 April titled as "The Mysterious Appearance of an Unknown Aircraft Louisbourg" was finally reported, 22 April 1942:

<sup>169</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 65 of 97

<sup>170</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 69 of 97

A report was received at this Headquarters on the morning of Monday, 20th April, 1942, originating with a school teacher, Miss MacDonald, at Big Lorraine, two miles from Louisburg. She mentioned to Major J.J. Kingan, when he was in Louisburg that on Wednesday, 15th April, 1942, at approximately 1300 hours, while she was at the school, a plane travelling at a high altitude dived down on the school and then disappeared. She knew nothing whatsoever about aircraft recognition but was certain that the aircraft had a black cross on a white background and that it was a monoplane. She thought the number of the plane was O 136 or O 139 but could not be certain. She did not report it because a black cross on a white background was no sign of identification to her. She could give no further details. The R.C.A.F. station was telephoned and F/O P.A. Wentzell, R.C.A.F. Intelligence Officer went to Louisburg and investigated Miss MacDonald. He took with him silhouettes of different types of aircraft but she was unable to identify the type which had dived over the school.

The Sydney R.C.A.F. station had aircraft in the air that day and it is possible that one of the R.C.A.F. planes passed over Big Lorraine school. However, she insisted the plane had a black cross on a white background.

An aircraft of unknown origin was either on a mission or a training flight and buzzed the school at Louisbourg sparking alarm. An enemy or any aircraft in the area for that matter was truly a cause for alarm and concern. The conjecture at the time, was that enemy aircraft could be launched either from a ship, or submarine.

Happily nothing was found. In a later interview by competent military authority, Ms. MacDonald, who had raised the alarm, could not identify any aircraft from silhouettes presented to her. She insisted though that the aircraft had black cross markings on it. Her inability to identify the markings may have been a form of hysteria. But let us not denigrate her observation as such. There was a deep psychological impression made on the Canadian public through propaganda, both ours and theirs. Pearl Harbor was still fresh in everyone's memory.

Civilian interest was peaked, and nerves were taut in order that the population remain alert to enemy action.... *especially*...in operational areas which the entirety of Cape Breton was at the time. Although Ms. Macdonald did not make her report sooner, but only days later, was of little value to the military. However, it had to be investigated and to her credit, Ms. Macdonald was observant and reported a sighting to competent authority when she was able too (observed 15 April reported 20 April). A meandering aircraft could have easily resulted in some enemy action too!

In fact, Ms. Macdonald, may have indeed spotted an aircraft with black cross markings. There was a film production on going and released in 1941. It was an early propaganda film concerning the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, "Captain of the Clouds". Aircraft out of Dartmouth were employed on its production including the station's Hawker Hurricane fighter that was painted with German markings.<sup>171</sup>

The film's climactic ferry mission was staged out over the Atlantic from RCAF Station Dartmouth. The film makers employed the base's operational Lockheed Hudson bombers, along with a repainted Hawker Hurricane that posed as a German Bf 109 fighter.<sup>[N 3]</sup> Due to the prominent Luftwaffe markings on the RCAF fighter, special alerts had to be posted in order to prevent the "trigger-happy" home defence gunners from shooting down their own aircraft.<sup>[4]</sup>"

It was unlikely though that this aircraft would still be around with German markings on it well after the film was made. But fighter aircraft of the type employed in that film, flew in and around the Maritimes.

And the east coast was a very busy place for aircraft that year. There may have been training aircraft in the area whose markings were obscured and mistaken by an observer on the ground unfamiliar with their markings. But the enemy aircraft threat was very real indeed and was listed as a potential threat in all security assessments of the day.

Our defenses against enemy aircraft attack had to be tested. Any potential enemy aircraft sighting likely put all on extreme alert with nerves on edge. A test of our preparedness came on 22 April 1942 with a blackout in the Sydney area.

A test blackout was held in the Sydney Area on the 22nd April, 1942, at 2050 hours. Military positions and the towns blacked out very quickly.

Sydney was an operational port. Yet Sydney and many other areas in Canada kept their municipal lights on throughout the war. It was not uncommon as many other communities in the Maritimes and Canada failed to impose a blackout. In fact, blackout conditions were rarely observed.

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<sup>171</sup> Orriss, Bruce. *When Hollywood Ruled the Skies: The Aviation Film Classics of World War II*. Hawthorne, California: Aero Associates Inc., 1984. [ISBN 0-9613088-0-X](#).

There are many written reports of “practice” black outs conducted throughout the Maritimes. But “lights” were never off. They remained on. They were a beacon for U-boats and a use for the enemy in navigation. Further, it may have assisted the enemy had he chosen to do so, by the illumination of in-shore targets to engage them.

A pleasant change came in May 1942. The Army was about to be used as human guinea pigs. But it was to be a pleasant experience this time around. They now enjoyed the luxury of a modern central heating system:<sup>172</sup>

On Thursday, 7th May, 42, the lease to S.MacDonald bldg. on George Street, Sydney, N.S. was signed.

Building will be converted into a 100 bed Hostel which will be operated by C.L.W.S.

It is conveniently located one block from Main City street and approximately 7 minute walk from R.R.station.

The building is 50' X 126', one story, and will be divided as follows:- Kitchen, store room, showers and toilets. 100 bed dormitory, recreation room, manager's bedroom, Office, baggage check room and a combination concert and dining room.

Conducted hot air system will be used for heating.

As far as possible all fittings, etc., will be purchased locally, and work will commence immediately.

The hot air system wasn't the standard at the time. This was both a new and novel innovation in what was the drive for economy and efficiency that the war demanded.

But military life was never a bed of roses. Action would be seen, but not necessarily action in fighting the enemy for self-preservation, or for God and Country. No, that fighting was conducted in other ways; such as IROc fighting a forest fire in the unit area 17 May 1942:<sup>173</sup>

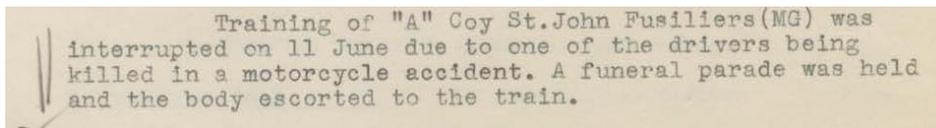
The Irish Regt. of Canada since "C" Coy left for Gaspe has now Bn.H.Q., H.Q. Coy and two platoons of "D" Coy stationed at Mulgrave. The troops at McNair's Point spent most of Sunday 17th May, fighting a forest fire north of McNair's Point. The recruit platoon has now fired the first practices on the 30 yd. range at Sand Point.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 81 of 97

<sup>173</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 88 of 97

Fire prevention became a growing and major concern over the course of 1942-1943.

There were other hazards to life and limb as well. What easily started as a routine day, easily turned to tragedy. "A" Coy St. John Fusiliers (MG) had its training interrupted by a fatality, 11 June 1942.<sup>174</sup>



Training of "A" Coy St. John Fusiliers (MG) was interrupted on 11 June due to one of the drivers being killed in a motorcycle accident. A funeral parade was held and the body escorted to the train.

This was one of the many young men and women who lost their lives while serving Canada, on the Homefront, during the Second World War.

Several interesting happenings occurred toward the end of June 1942. First, the 6th A.A. Bty. received two 3.7" A.A. guns, 25 June. Work was carried out at the new gun site, clearing trees, levelling ground etc.

Second, was the instance of a coordinated RCAF / Army exercise in the area. "At 1100 hours Monday 29th June, a gas spray attack by an aircraft was carried out on Edward Battery. Three minutes before the attack was delivered a general alarm was called and all men were in position on the guns before the plane arrived. The plane did an efficient job spraying the dummy guns, but the real guns and detachment were untouched."<sup>175</sup>

The cadence and pace of activities in 1942 suggest that the security threat made things interesting and challenging! Units, commanding officers, and troops all reacted well and were professional in the performance of their duties. If anything, this short sketch of events proved that the situation on the ground was anything but boring or stagnant. It was always volatile and changing. It also demonstrates that war often as not is 90% boredom followed by 10% sheer terror as tensions mounted throughout the year.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid File 321.009 (D124), Nov 41/Jun 42, Pg. 97 of 97

<sup>175</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Jun 42/Jan 43, Pg. 7 of 123

## 12 – 1942 to 1943 The Evolving Security Threat

Prime Minister Mackenzie King brought to light 26 January 1942, issues of concern to his government; issues regarding Canada's future and ongoing war effort. It boiled down to one serious issue, percolating beneath the conduct of the war and his political life. Moreover, the subject that he was about to broach, would have consequences, and great impact on the lives of many Canadians as well as, impacts to national unity if his government did not get it right.

King put forth to his audience that " In the political controversy which, unfortunately, has become so acute of late ; which is obscuring the magnitude and balanced nature of Canada's war effort, and which, moreover, threatens to impair its efficiency, attempts are being made to confuse in the public mind three things which should be kept separate and distinct . With respect to each of these, the government's position is being misrepresented:

The first relates to total effort to meet total war.

The second relates to national selective service as a means to this end.

The third relates to the application of compulsion without restriction of any kind; in other words, to conscription for service in the armed forces overseas ."<sup>176</sup>

We see King's pre-eminent concern then, lay with the need for more men in the service of Canada's Armed Forces. The hint of a resolution in the matter, lay in the guise of a need for "conscription". That issue came to plague King much later in the war. But his speech of 26 January was preparatory and introduced into the public psyche, a coming problem, should the war not end soon. It was a problem that Canada would have to face and deal with.

Apart from the potential conscription issue, King's Liberal government came under scrutiny and pressure concerning its war expenditures during 1942. Future

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<sup>176</sup> Canada. Parliament, William Lyon Mackenzie King, [The Real Meaning Of A Total War Effort](#), (Speeches), 26 January 1942, reported in Hamilton Spectator, 1942/01/26

Source:

<https://collections.museedelhistoire.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5061203>

Accessed: 4 March 2019

Conservative Prime Minister John G Diefenbaker made an issue of it. Diefenbaker toured Nova Scotia that year. Diefenbaker was disgusted by the sad state of affairs concerning public spending there in particular. It led to a full government accounting by 1943.<sup>177</sup>

In the meantime; King was left to defend himself and his government. But what King actually did at this time, was to prepare the nation for the notion of “Total War”. “Total War” was far beyond “government spending”. King was paving the way and preparing Canadians for the unpalatable costs of war concerning the future conscription of men for overseas duty.<sup>178</sup>

King went on to say “It is not enough to create a navy, an army, and an air force; the sailors, soldiers and airmen must be fed, clothed and armed; they must be moved to the area of combat, and communications must be maintained ; reinforcements of men and supplies must be kept flowing. All this requires the most careful planning and detailed organization”.<sup>179</sup> King was laying down the preparatory case for future demands that would have to be met if forethought and planning failed. In a nutshell, “Total War” required the directed employment of all of Canada’s resources and people.

All this brouhaha at the national level, and its politics, created its own problems that had to be addressed. But on the micro-economic and tactical level, it also had an impact. The need for planning and the proper balance of resources proved to be very true regardless of King’s case and was keenly felt down to units then serving on Canada’s east coast and elsewhere. The government’s overall intent percolated downward through the various chains of command. Orders, directives and other minutia of administrative detail were amended down to the lowest levels in the Canadian Armed Forces, whether they were of political or strategic concern.

As such, orders and instructions had to be periodically reviewed and updated. One important update 6 July 1942 concerned Operation Order No. 7 for the

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<sup>177</sup> Gerry Madigan, **The Crucible for Change – Defence Spending in Debert Nova Scotia during World War II**, *the Royal Canadian Air Force Journal Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2013(original), reprinted RCAF Journal - SPRING 2016 - Volume 5, Issue 2*, pg. 17

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 1-2

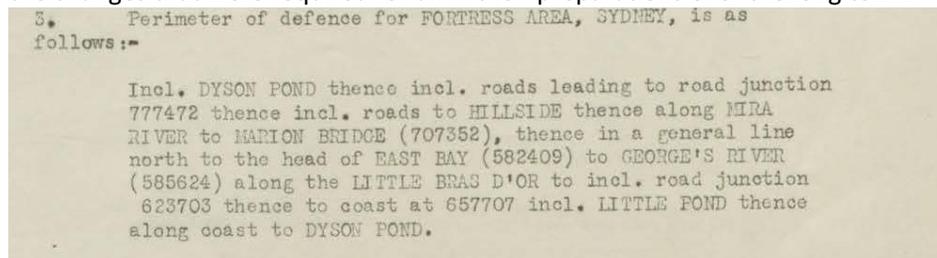
<sup>179</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 2-3

Sydney Area. Operation Order No. 7 was amended by a directive titled "Amendment Number 1". The update reflected the current state of affairs concerning the enemy's intentions and capabilities. It was an amendment that was very disconcerting. "Amendment Number 1" redefined the enemy's intent and capability.<sup>180</sup>

The "ENEMY" intention was presented as:

"The scale of attack at present, exclusive of AIRPORT can be summarized as bombardment by a **Capital** ship; one or two 8 inch Cruisers; or by a merchant raider mounting 6" guns; attack by submarines and small surface craft; attack by small raiding parties; torpedo, bomb or gas attack by shipborne or long-range shore-based or sea-borne aircraft on sea-borne coastal and inland objectives."<sup>181</sup>

This amendment also redefined Sydney's defence perimeter. Although this was not necessarily germane to the Canso Defence Area, it was a clear indication of the changes that were required for all in their preparations over the long term:<sup>182</sup>



3. Perimeter of defence for FORTRESS AREA, SYDNEY, is as follows:-

Incl. DYSON POND thence incl. roads leading to road junction 777472 thence incl. roads to HILLSIDE thence along MIRA RIVER to MARION BRIDGE (707352), thence in a general line north to the head of EAST BAY (582409) to GEORGE'S RIVER (585624) along the LITTLE BRAS D'OR to incl. road junction 623703 thence to coast at 657707 incl. LITTLE POND thence along coast to DYSON POND.

The Mira and Marion Bridge references became legend in local folklore many years later. These "peaceful" places were cast in song by song writers not yet born! But in 1942, the Mira and Marion Bridge were places of potential death and warfare.

Such peaceful places were once considered potential points of war simply because they held some strategic or tactical significance. They may have been potential turning points on the ground or field of battle that had to be defended.

<sup>180</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D125), Aug 42 to Oct 43 Vol 2, pg. 7-8/15

<sup>181</sup> Ibid file 321.009 (D125), Aug 42 to Oct 43 Vol 2. Pg. 7-8/15

<sup>182</sup> Ibid file 321.009 (D125), Aug 42 to Oct 43 Vol 2. Pg. 7-8/15

These were places which every junior or senior officer had to consider in military appreciations for the defence of that ground.

It seemed the entire Island of Cape Breton and the Canso Defence Area were subject to potential enemy attack. But was that ever a possibility? One of the Principles of War is the element of surprise. Surprise can be achieved by the initiation of an attack premised on the development of new technologies and capabilities whether on land, sea and air. And the enemy was very capable in developing such technologies.

Prime Minister King laid out a case for preparations as; "A necessary foundation of our whole effort is the maintenance of the security of our own Canadian territory and territories like Newfoundland and Labrador immediately adjacent to our shores . I know some of our citizens were impatient with the government for insisting, from the outbreak of war, upon our responsibilities for the coastal and territorial defence of Canada ." <sup>183</sup> He starkly reminded Canadians that "Recent events in the Pacific, and the sinking of ships off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, should serve to dispel any lingering belief that Canada is immune from attack" . <sup>184</sup>

The enemy was not idle in preparations or development of technologies that could be used against us. The Japanese developed submarine technology with an air capability. <sup>185</sup>

Had they transferred such technology to the Germans? Germany had a well-developed aircraft industry. Had they developed a strategic bomber capable of attacking targets all along the east coast of Canada? Their navy had merchant raiders apart from cruisers. Were they planning a surprise attack on some vital asset to disrupt/dislodge our preparations and logistics?

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 3

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 3

<sup>185</sup> [Warfare History Network](#), **The I-400: Japan's Wanted Underwater Aircraft Carriers to Launch a Second Pearl Harbor**, 2018

Source: read:<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/i-400-japans-wanted-underwater-aircraft-carriers-launch-second-pearl-harbor-29227>

Accessed: 8 Oct 2018

All these were possibilities that had to be considered and whose eventualities, prepared for. The strategic and security issue set the tone for the coming months in the Canso Defence area.

In fact, the Luftwaffe had plans to develop long range aircraft. But their plans were thwarted simply because they lacked resources and fuel. Surprisingly, it was Germany's defeat at Stalingrad that put paid to that effort. Success at Stalingrad would have guaranteed them access to resources with which they then could have developed these weapons. As it was, the effort sapped their strength and they were unable to pursue the industrial development of long-range aircraft.<sup>186</sup>

The need for preparation and defence remained a constant vigil though, and by 29 August 1942, the air threat to the Canso Defence Area was once again considered. It was a necessary expedient, despite the fact, that the threat of air attack was most unlikely. It was the least probable threat in the Canso Defence Area. The real threat was more likely to come from a lurking U-boat. Coincidentally 29 August, such a threat existed nearby in the Atlantic, a ship was torpedoed, and rescued sailors brought to the Sydney area.

The sea approach was of great concern to King. "The Canadian navy has a share in this primary responsibility for our territorial defence. Our navy has also a great and growing responsibility in the North Atlantic." King pointed out to Canadians that "Its part in the battle of the Atlantic is already important. We are all aware of the great strain which has been thrown on the British navy, and, more recently, on the United States navy, by the existence of warfare in every ocean."<sup>187</sup>

Moreover, King reminded Canadians of what was incumbent upon the shoulders of the Navy and Merchant Marine in the Battle of the Atlantic. " We know, too, that the possibility of finally crushing Hitler depends upon keeping open the sea lanes from North America to Britain and Europe. From the outset, the government has placed no limit on the expansion of Canada's navy. We have manned ships as fast as the navy has been able to acquire them. Not only is the

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<sup>186</sup> Manfred Griebel, *Luftwaffe over America – The Secret Plans to Bomb the United States in World War II*, Greenhill Books, 2004, Pg. 14

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 3

greatest possible Canadian naval strength needed in the North Atlantic, but so are merchant ships to carry men and supplies to Britain. Canada is providing and will continue to provide and to man both, to the very limit of our capacity.”<sup>188</sup> Such was the importance of Canada’s efforts for which there would be no limits on spending or treasure.

The consequences of U-boat activity were becoming very plain, as found in this example, reported by the Canso Defence Area, 2 September:<sup>189</sup>

Ships:  
An American transport ship which left Sydney Harbour approx. a week ago was torpedoed on the Atlantic Ocean and some of the survivors were brought back to Sydney at 0200 hrs. 29th August. The Army was asked by the R.C.N. to assist in caring for these civilians and as a result 90 American civilian survivors were given accommodation in Victoria Park. 46 were placed with the Regiment de Joliette and 44 were placed with the 38 Provost Coy. CPC., and given rations and quarters. A number of trucks, approx. 9 in number were used to transport the men and to arrange bedding. The R.C.A.S.C. ambulance was busy until morning taking injured survivors to the various hospitals.  
It is expected that these civilians will leave Sydney soon. Col. Smith, U.S. Army visited Col. W. H. Dobbie and thanked him for the splendid and quick aid that had been given to these survivors. As most of the men had very little clothing, garments were lent to them and every effort was made to assist them.  
The R.C.N., Sydney, also took a number of survivors and placed them in various places in the city, principally the Allied Merchants Seamens' Club.  
It was impossible to keep this sinking secret as all the survivors were wandering around the city, in the hospitals and various other places.

By this time in the summer of 1942, Mackenzie King’s words proved correct. Canada was not immune from U-boat attack. That summer proved to be an active one regarding U-boat activity in Atlantic Canada, especially in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Twenty-three ships were torpedoed with 22 lost in the Gulf of St

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 3

<sup>189</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), Jun 42/Jan 43, Pg. 38 of 123. (cover page included)

Lawrence alone.<sup>190</sup> Canadian littoral waters suddenly became a battleground. German U-boats had entered the St Lawrence estuary, and now posed an imminent threat. They pointed a dagger straight at the Canadian heartland, and operated from Newfoundland in the north, up the St Lawrence estuary, and over as far south below Halifax. In fact, if you look at the area with a discerning eye, it was a significant operational theatre of maritime warfare. The Canso Defence Area was one part of that operational theatre.

In June 1942 alone, three U-boats sought targets of opportunity just off Nova Scotia. They were:

1. U-132 (Kptlt. Ernst Vogelsang). Position 42.27N, 66.06W. Departed La Pallice on 10 Jun 1942 (day 52 at sea).
2. U-754 (Kptlt. Hans Oestermann). Position 43.02N, 64.52W. Departed Brest on 19 Jun 1942 (day 43 at sea).
3. U-458 (Kptlt. Kurt Diggins). Position 43.21N, 64.45W. Departed Kiel on 21 Jun 1942 (day 41 at sea).<sup>191</sup>

U-754's history is worthy of further inspection. U-754 was later sunk by No. 113 (BR) Squadron RCAF on a separate patrol.

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<sup>190</sup> Colonel C.P. Stacey, O.B.E., C.D., A.M., Ph.D., F.R.S.C., Director, Historical Section, General Staff, **Official History of the Canadian Army - In the Second World War**

**Volume I ,SIX YEARS OF WAR, The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific**, Published by Authority of the Minister of National Defence, First Published 1948, pg. 175

Source <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/Canada/CA/SixYears/SixYears-5.html>

Accessed: 13 August 2010

*Transcribed and formatted by Patrick Clancey, HyperWar Foundation*

For access to full publication see:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/Canada/CA/SixYears/index.html>

<sup>191</sup> U-Boat Net

Source: <https://www.uboot.net/boats/patrols/search.php>

Accessed: 2 Aug 2018

No. 113 (BR) Squadron RCAF was an east coast unit based at Yarmouth. The Squadron's most notable achievement occurred 31 July 1942. Squadron Leader N.E. Small in Hudson 625 conducted a patrol near Sable Island. Small sighted the surfaced U-754. Small ultimately made three passes at U-754 that began with dropped depth charges, just as the submarine began to dive on his first pass.

Small's second pass found U-754 just under the water in some apparent difficulty. Small's depth charges damaged the boat. On his third pass, Hudson 625 fired its front guns at the boat's conning tower. The plane then observed the damaged boat for 55 minutes. To Small's surprise, the U-boat exploded before him, and that finally settled the matter.

U-754 was sunk with all hands lost.<sup>192</sup> That was eventually to be the fate of many boats then patrolling in Canadian waters.

But U-boats were approaching very close to Nova Scotia July 1942. On 27 July, an east coast fishing schooner out of Lockeport NS, commanded by Frederick Sutherland, Captain was sunk by a U-boat. The crew of the 30-ton Schooner Lucille M. was ordered off their vessel by the commander of a U-boat, and into their lifeboat before their vessel was destroyed.

Three crew members were wounded in the incident, principally those who had returned to their ship to retrieve some items of personal belonging just as the U-boat commenced firing. All managed to escape with relatively minor injuries. The crew subsequently rowed 100 miles to shore where all 11 crew members landed safe and sound at Shelburne, Nova Scotia.<sup>193</sup>

That U-boat was U-89. U-89 described their attack on Lucille M in their daily logs that registered their assault began at 09.55 hours on 25 July 1942. The motor

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<sup>192</sup> from "The Picture on the Wall" short story in "Operational Training and Antisubmarine Air Warfare on Canada's East Coast - The Second World War Collected Papers" by Gerry Madigan, 23 March 2018 at madiganstories.com (self-published book) pg. 177-178

<sup>193</sup> Hamilton Spectator, **Canadian Fishing Vessel Sunk By U-Boat Shells Off Nova Scotian Shores**, 27 July 1942

Source: <https://collections.museedelhistoire.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5120761>

Accessed: 4 March 2019

fishing vessel was only found because U-89 surfaced to recharge her batteries.<sup>194</sup> U-89 sunk the Lucille M. just off Cable Sable at 42° 02'N, 65° 38'W - Grid CB 1295. U-89 destroyed the Lucille M. using only 20 incendiary and 15 high-explosive rounds fired from its deck guns.<sup>195</sup> U-89 over-estimated Lucille M's gross tonnage as 54 tonnes.

The U-boat threat was a persistent one, that continued well into the fall. On the 2nd of August 1942, Operational Training Unit 34, Pennfield New Brunswick despatched a Ventura Bomber on an anti-submarine patrol off the coast of Nova Scotia. Their daily log stated "W/Comdr. N.W. Timmerman, D.S.O., D.F.C. returned from Dartmouth on completion of an anti-submarine sortie in Ventura AE851", but he found nothing.<sup>196</sup> The U-boat threat was so serious that Canada mobilized all military assets; naval, land and air, to deal with it.

Despite the excitement of the U-boat war, life continued in the Strait sometimes as the usual and mundane, and sometimes as the unexpected. At the height of the U-boat threat there was a change of command in the Canso Defence Area, September 1942.

Command and defence of the area finally passed from the Irish Regiment of Canada to the Fusiliers of St Laurent, 16 September in the Mulgrave area, a process that began 7 September:<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid Hamilton Spectator, 27 July 1942

<sup>195</sup> UBoat.Net, [Ships hit by U-boats, Lucille M., Canadian Motor fishing vessel](https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1959.html), 2019

Source: <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/1959.html>

Accessed: 4 March 2019

<sup>196</sup> G Christian Larsen, *Daily Log Reports and War Diary, Operational Training Unit 34, Pennfield, NB.* Pennfield Military Historical Society, 2 August 1942

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/141841559219547/admins/>

Accessed 2 August 2018

<sup>197</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 47 of 123

chamber and mustard gas demonstrations

On Monday, 7th September, the Fusiliers du St. Laurent arrived in the Mulgrave Area relieving the Irish Regiment of Canada. At the present time this Unit is approximately 225 men understrength. It is hoped that this situation will be relieved shortly.

... had two officers return from

Significantly, at the height of the U-boat threat, the Fusiliers du St Laurent, were under manned by 225 men!

With that change of command also came proposed boundary changes for the guns at Canso. On 19 Sep 1942 the records provide specific coordinates to gun placements:<sup>198</sup>

SECRET

S.F.S. 2-E-1.

Headquarters, Sydney & Canso Defences,  
Sydney, N.S., 19th September, 1942.

Headquarters,  
Atlantic Command,  
Halifax, N. S.

O.C., 16th Cst. Regt., RCA - For information.

Examination Service  
Strait of Canso

1. Officer Commanding, 86th Coast Bty., R.C.A., after consultation with the N.O.I.C., Sydney, suggests that the examination lines at both entrances to the Strait of Canso be changed.

2. He points out that the existing lines do not give the examination batteries sufficient opportunity for fire for effect should vessels ignore bring-to rounds and that bring-to rounds are very apt to ricochet on land points.

3. The present bearings are:-  
North Entrance - 50° grid from North Canso Lighthouse.  
South Entrance - Fort Melford to Bear Island Light.

The proposed bearings are:-  
North Entrance - 30° grid from North Canso Lighthouse.  
South Entrance - 65° grid from Fort Melford to Turbalton Head.

4. It is recommended that the proposed bearings be taken into use.

*W.H. Dobbie*  
(W.H. DOBBIE) Colonel,  
Commanding Sydney & Canso Defences.

HHT/NM

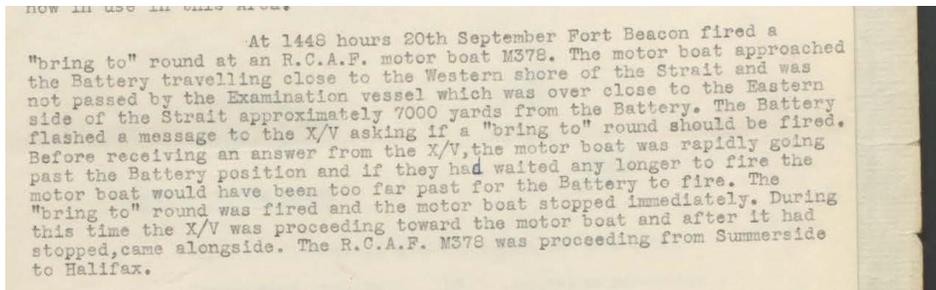
RECEIVED  
SEP 21 1942  
FILE  
S-117-72  
ATLANTIC COMMAND HQ  
19 1942

<sup>198</sup> Ibid file 321.009 (D125), Aug 42 to Oct 43 Vol 2. pg. 2/15pg

The arcs of fire employed in the examination service, not only provide the bearing changes used, but they also clearly identified key locations of the guns that may be useful to pinpointing those sites today.

The changes were both necessary and important as “the existing lines did not give the examination batteries sufficient opportunity for fire for effect should vessels ignore bring-to rounds and that bring-to rounds are very apt to ricochet on land points.” In fact, one abandoned gun position at Auld’s Cove today suggests that a fired round likely traversed over the old highway. Brought forward to the present, that round would likely traverse directly over, what is now, the Trans-Canada Highway today. Pity the wandering motorist who may have had the misfortune of traversing this line of fire at a most inopportune time!

And an occasion did come to pass to prove that point on 20 September 1942. The guns took a very necessary action as a RCAF Motor Torpedo Boat, used in air sea rescue, failed to apply the correct recognition codes.<sup>199</sup>



At 1448 hours 20th September Fort Beacon fired a "bring to" round at an R.C.A.F. motor boat M378. The motor boat approached the Battery travelling close to the Western shore of the Strait and was not passed by the Examination vessel which was over close to the Eastern side of the Strait approximately 7000 yards from the Battery. The Battery flashed a message to the X/V asking if a "bring to" round should be fired. Before receiving an answer from the X/V, the motor boat was rapidly going past the Battery position and if they had waited any longer to fire the motor boat would have been too far past for the Battery to fire. The "bring to" round was fired and the motor boat stopped immediately. During this time the X/V was proceeding toward the motor boat and after it had stopped, came alongside. The R.C.A.F. M378 was proceeding from Summerside to Halifax.

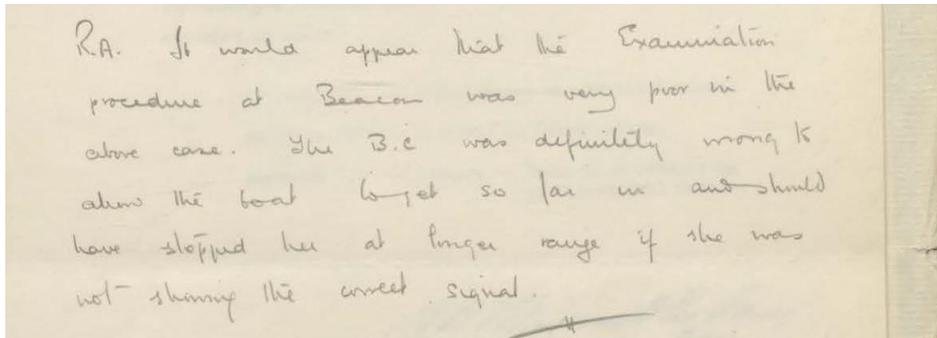
A Motor Torpedo Boat was a very deadly vessel. It was a weapon of war employed by both Allied and Enemy navies during the war. It was unlikely that such a vessel would ever be employed in Canadian waters as it lacked range, but a single purpose mission, launched from a mother ship, was always a distinct possibility. No chances could be taken. It would seem no one was immune from

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 57 of 123

the quick reaction of the guns if they ran afoul of the rules of engagement and procedures!

The minute to this observation:



Still, higher authorities were less than pleased with the performance of the gun batteries. The Battery Commander was admonished as he wrongly allowed the boat to get so far in, and that he should have stopped her at longer range for not showing the correct signal.

At this point though, Canadian authorities had no knowledge that the Kriegsmarine had no plans for incursions into the St Lawrence or for landing troops directly onto Canadian shores. The Kriegsmarine's first incursion here, was merely accidental. However, the Kriegsmarine quickly realized it as an opportunity. U-553's attack truly struck at Canada's heartland and morale. Canadian military dispositions seemed to be lacking, unprepared, and largely disorganized.

The great prize then, was the blow to Canadian morale. The Kriegsmarine need not attack directly over a continued time, the mere presence of a U-boat was sufficient to cause concern. Questions were soon raised by many "as to how German submarines could have carried out such vicious attacks with complete impunity within Canada's territorial waters?"<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Fabrice Mosseray, **The Battle of the St. Lawrence -A Little-Known Episode in the Battle of the Atlantic**, UBoat.Net 1995-2010, 29 Mar 2002.

The naval resources at Canada's disposal in the summer of 1942, protecting the Gulf of St. Lawrence, amounted to a small naval force of one Bangor class minesweeper, two Fairmilies class motor launches, and an armed yacht. This naval task force was insufficient for the requirements of patrolling, much less protecting a water course, 575 km long and 110 km wide at some points.

The operational area roughly bounded Sept-Îles, Quebec to the Strait of Belle Isles on the North Shore of Quebec and Labrador, and on the South Shore from Rivière du Loup to the Gaspé Peninsula, thence to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island; with the Island of Newfoundland as the cork in the bottle to the east.<sup>201</sup>

Canada was unprepared and had to quickly reorganize its resources. But so too was the German navy. It too was most unprepared for war in 1939. It would be two years before U-boats began to seriously threaten the western Atlantic.<sup>202</sup>

Thus, up until 1941 the German Navy, confined its activities largely in the approaches to the British Isles. It was inevitable though that they would come to operate further and deeper in the western Atlantic and, ultimately in the Gulf of St Lawrence. Their untimely arrival was indeed expected. It was only a question of "when", that was clearly answered by 1942.

Security was paramount and the OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty wished to re-arrange his dispositions and advance his local defence preparations in anticipation of current threats. He determined that his medium machine gun positions were inadequate and wished to move them to suit his needs and requirements. He sought permission to do so. He must have been aware of the sensitive nature of this

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Source: <http://uboat.net/articles/?article=29>

Accessed: 30 November 2010

<sup>201</sup> Ibid Fabrice Mosseray, 29 March 2002

<sup>202</sup> [Hugh A. Halliday, Canadian Military History in Perspective, Eastern Air Command: Air Force, Part 14](#), March 1, 2006, The Legion Magazine

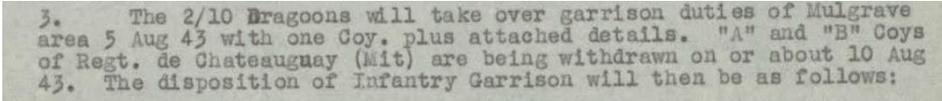
Source: <http://www.legionmagazine.com/en/index.php/2006/03/eastern-air-command/>

Accessed: 27 January 2011

request in going forward to a higher headquarters. His superior HQ backed him initially, 25 June 1943. They stated that he was responsible for his local defence and able to move the machine guns to suit his requirement.

But there was a caveat. The OC was free to move the machine guns around in location but not their allotment between locations. These moves would be reviewed and if they did not suit the principles of defence; OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty would be advised in due course.<sup>203</sup> So, yes, the OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty was responsible for command and control, but limits were placed on his responsibility.

Local manning also became problematic by August. There were infantry reductions in the area at a time when Forts and Fortress commanders became increasingly responsible for local defence. There was also a shift of units that had an impact as well:<sup>204</sup>



3. The 2/10 Dragoons will take over garrison duties of Mulgrave area 5 Aug 43 with one Coy. plus attached details. "A" and "B" Coys of Regt. de Chateaugay (Mit) are being withdrawn on or about 10 Aug 43. The disposition of Infantry Garrison will then be as follows:

The reduction in infantry also led to the elimination of beach patrols effective 2 August 1943. Manpower was in short supply, so preparations and plans were adjusted to that change.

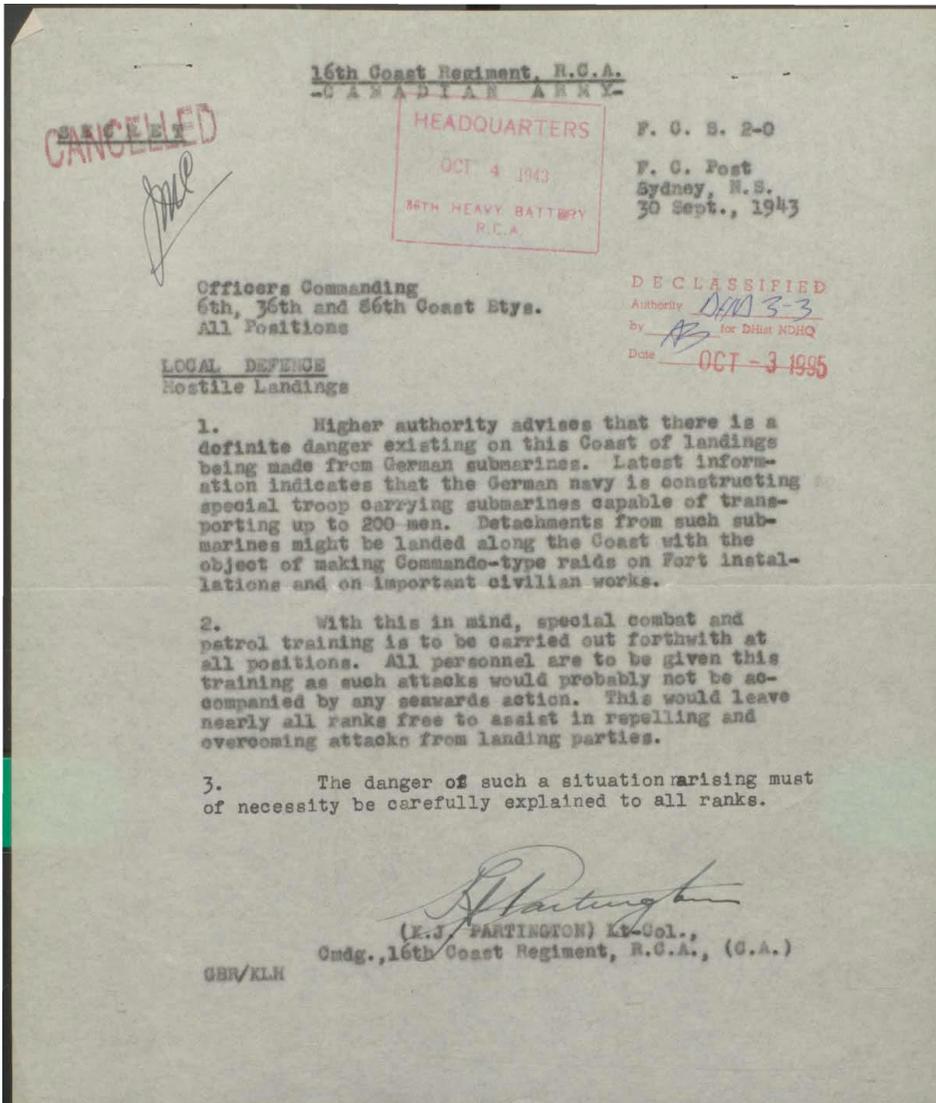
A reduction in manpower could not have happened at a more inopportune time. The threat of German landings in the area was perceived as even greater than before. This sense of danger was conveyed in updated intelligence summaries sent to all Coast battery units and likely depicted the true situation:<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D4) (B.B.S. 2-0) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jun 42/Sep 43 pg. 36 of 38

<sup>204</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D4) (B.B.S. 2-0) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jun 42/Sep 43 pg. 37 of 38

<sup>205</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D4) (B.B.S. 2-0) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jun 42/Sep 43 pg. 38 of 38



The Strait of Canso was fast becoming a very dangerous place if this intelligence proved to be true! But the threat of invasion or attack lessened as the Canso Strait became ice bound and closed at the end of shipping season each year.

If anything, 1942 proved MacKenzie King's point that "All this requires the most careful planning and detailed organization".<sup>206</sup> The need for that planning and the proper balance of resources proved to be true and was keenly felt down to units then serving on Canada's east coast and elsewhere. They lived through it month by month. But ongoing "command and control" problems and boundary issues came to a head in 1943. Until then, the troops lived in interesting times.

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, King Speech, 26 January 1942, pg. 2-3

13 - " .... rolls down hill."

War raged all about the Canso Defence Area. The men serving there had no illusions. They faced the unexpected, in the knowledge of the clear and present danger of a cunning enemy, whose movements and intentions remained largely unknown.

The Canso Defence Area was a vast coastline to defend and protect. And let us be very clear, the enemy was always very close at times, and at least on one occasion, very close off Country Island at the mouth of the Country Harbour River, in the approaches to the Bay of Fundy.

Maintaining vigilance was difficult. The enemy took no direct action against our defences, that we know of, and that possibly lulled many into a false state of security. But they certainly made their presence felt everywhere. So, danger was always present and very real.

But another battle was continually ongoing in the Canso Defence Area. Its presence was felt, daily. That battle was not exciting, but it was draining. It would try the patience of Job and was no less real. It proved to be the battle of procurement, victualing and accommodation, the penultimate and ongoing test for those serving there.

The great problem was always the availability of real property. It was a matter of concern to all unit commanders. It was the serious lack of safe housing, accommodating, and victualling their troops that was of concern through out the war. In fact, it was a constant headache. The administration of the problems was subject to a separate file, amounting to some 200 pages of detail, spanning the years 1939 to 1943. Crucial decisions and account renderings were made when the war was at its most critical stages.<sup>207</sup>

The military staff responsible for resolving the ongoing conundrum; not only had to contend with the foibles of military bureaucracy, but also those of local personalities. The first Commanding Officer serving in the area, Lt Col Fraser of

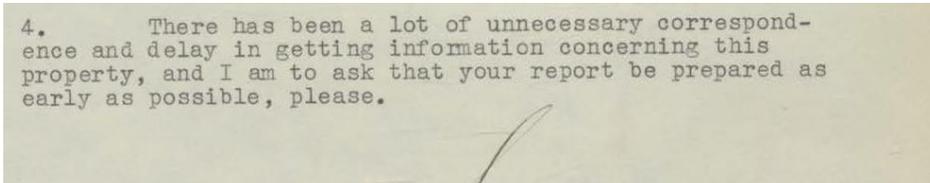
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<sup>207</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Melford Battery, 345 009(D48) Correspondence, msgs, contracts, requirements, etc. 1 Oct 39/31 Aug 43, 201 pg. (cover page included)

the Pictou Highlanders, suffered greatly to the point of exhaustion and was hospitalized. All the foibles hidden in administration, placed an unnecessary pressure on him and eventually took their toll. Continuing frustrations also pestered his successors over the years.<sup>208</sup>

But it was all brought to a head in 1941. One contract issue and complaint were received from a local resident. It was an interesting tale. Apparently, the Guysborough resident in question regarding this one contract, was considered “mentally” incompetent and had a guardian. Regardless he wrote several letters to the Department of National Defence (DND) that suggested he was far from mentally incompetent. He raised several pointed questions concerning property rental and damages to his property.<sup>209</sup>

It resulted in the following missive:



4. There has been a lot of unnecessary correspondence and delay in getting information concerning this property, and I am to ask that your report be prepared as early as possible, please.

It was a matter that apparently was not easily resolved and required some in depth investigation. “I am directed to point out that your above letter does not cover the alleged destruction of buildings estimated at \$200.00. As Mr. ... has reduced his rental to \$15.00 per month, it is desired to know at once whether any compensation is owing for damage to the buildings.”<sup>210</sup>

The system was exasperated and desired answers, so much so, that a Board of Inquiry was held to determine what had really transpired! Conclusions were drawn together and summarized in a letter, 18 March 1941, that stated:<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, Personal letter from LCol Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine, pg. 30-32/97

<sup>209</sup> Ibid Melford Battery, 345 009 (D48), Pg. 27/201

<sup>210</sup> Ibid Melford Battery, 345 009 (D48), Pg. 29/201

<sup>211</sup> Ibid Melford Battery, 345 009 (D48), Pg. 31/201

HC.2-10 (Ingrs)  
HC.C.8034, FD.1.  
(Ingrs)

Headquarters, M.D.No.6.  
Halifax, N. S., March 18.

41

The Secretary,  
Department of National Defence,  
Ottawa, ONT.

Property of William Scott  
Sand Point.

Reference HC.C.8034, FD.1. (Ingrs) dated the  
6th of March, 1941:

1. Inquiry has been made regarding the statement that buildings to the value of \$200.00 had been torn down on the property occupied by troops.
2. It is ascertained that at the time the troops were first quartered on this property, there was a detached house and a barn on the property.
3. On the night of October 22th, 1940, a fire took place in both house and barn. The sentry observed the fire and gave the alarm and the fire picquet extinguished the fire in a few minutes.
4. A Court of Inquiry was assembled on the 29th of October by order of the Officer Commanding, Sydney and Canso Areas.
5. This Court, after thorough investigation, was unable to find that any military personnel had been near the two buildings prior to the fire and no responsibility could be placed for the outbreak.
6. The estimate of damage done by fire was:
  - (a) "Damage to the barn estimated at \$20.00".
  - (b) "Damage to the old house, not estimated. This building is not worth the cost of repairs. Prior to the fire, the building was practically worthless and the maximum salvage that could have been obtained was about \$35.00. The situation has not changed since the fire."
7. The court further stated - "Insofar as the Court of Inquiry can determine, these buildings are not the property of the Department of National Defence and are not under lease to the Department."

W.C.Y.



CEM

(C.E. Conolly)  
Brigadier,  
District Officer Commanding,  
Military District No.6.

13

The whole issue concerned the loss of a house and barn due to a fire. The value of the barn was placed at \$20.00. The Court of inquiry was unable to set a value on the fire damages done to the house. But it did set a property value at \$35.00. Surprisingly the board concluded that the fire made no difference in these valuations as from their record neither was leased or occupied by the Department of National Defence at the time of the fire.<sup>212</sup>

On 22 July 1941, Sand Point widow Clementine Carter, wrote a letter to the Minister of National Defence:

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid Melford Battery, 345 009 (D48), Pg. 30/201

Sand Point,  
Guysborough Co., N. S.  
July 22nd, 1941.

Mr. Ralson,  
Dear Sir,-

The National Defence here at Sand Point has been hauling gravel off my property. I have wrote Lieut. Peach at Mulgrave but have not heard from him. The army trucks have been making a road over my property also and my pasture where I keep my cow is open most all the time. Please see if you can help me as I have to pay a heavy tax. I own this property and have a clear title which cannot be disputed. I am only a poor widow woman.

I remain,

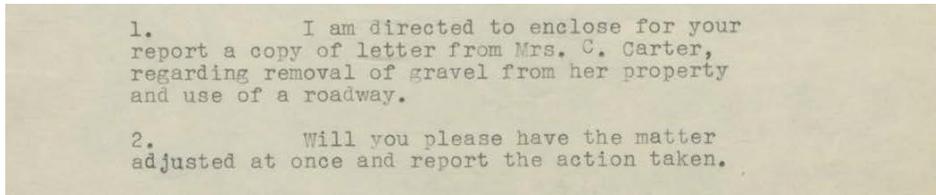
(Sgd) Mrs. Clementine Carter

P.S. If you want to get any information write Charles Grant (lightkeeper) Sand Point.

*Copy of Mrs.*  
*43*

Mrs. Carter complained to military authorities at Mulgrave, that gravel was being removed from her property. Her complaints were either disregarded or ignored, and never answered.

Mrs. Carter's letter reached the hallowed halls of the Department of National Defence(DND) Ottawa, that precipitated a response and direction to Military District 6 on 31 July 1941, who ordered a review of the circumstances of her complaint.



This turnaround was rather quick given Mrs. Carter's letter was only drafted 22 July. The clue lies in Mrs. Carter's original letter. Her letter was directed to the Minister of National Defence, Mr. Ralston, immediately upon receipt, although she misspelt his name! The poor widow woman had just unleashed a firestorm. Her letter was the equivalent of what is known today as a ministerial inquiry.

James Layton Ralston, a famed Nova Scotian lawyer, politician, and warrior, was born at Amherst, NS on 27 September 1881. He died at Montréal on 21 May 1948. At the height of the First World War he was a battalion commander with a reputation for bravery and competence. In civilian life, Ralston was twice minister of National Defence, once 1926-30 and, lastly 1940-44.<sup>213</sup>

Ralston was an intense person, scrupulously honest, and an able representative noted for safeguarding the political interests of the Maritime provinces. He was a stalwart in Prime Minister Mackenzie King's WWII Cabinet.<sup>214</sup> Mrs. Carter had piqued the interest of the right person in safeguarding her interests!

The Minister's attention tumbled downhill and soon found its weight upon the shoulders of one young Lt R.F. Peach, RCE the Army's engineer and works officer at Mulgrave. Lt Peach was responsible for the Canso Area. Peach already had his hands full dealing with the "Mr. Doe" incident, at Sand Point Guysborough NS.

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<sup>213</sup> Historica Canada, The Canadian Encyclopedia, James Layton Ralston, Source: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/james-layton-ralston/> Accessed: 22 Jan 2017

<sup>214</sup> Ibid Historica Canada, Ralston

SAND POINT

1. Enclosed please find tracing of the survey made on the property belonging to [REDACTED] Scott of Sand Point, Guysboro County. This property is held in trust and the trustee is [REDACTED] of Guysboro, Guysboro County.
2. This property has been occupied by the Department of National Defence since the first of the war and due to legal entanglements concerning the estate it was unable to have a settlement made until the present time. [REDACTED] is at present an inmate of the Nova Scotia Mental Hospital.

In fact, the “Mr. Doe” property too was under review, and was coincidentally located at Sand point.<sup>215</sup> Was it a matter of complete coincidence that two problems originated at Sand Point, that attracted the minister’s and department’s attention, and that required significant resources to resolving each matter?

The “Mr. Doe” problem was resolved in a final review and decision to offer a rent of \$100 per year for the use of the property. The government’s offer was made to the property owner, 2 August 1941. But the Department’s offer had been conveyed to him previously, and accepted, 28 July 1941. That issue appeared to be over and done with. But the Miss Carter inquiry continued.

On the same day as the final arrangements made on the “Mr. Doe” property, Lt Peach received a letter directing him to investigate Mrs. Carter’s situation thoroughly.<sup>216</sup> It all flowed rapidly down hill from the top in the chain of command in Ottawa, to Military District 6, only to land squarely on the head of young Lt Peach in Mulgrave.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Melford Battery, 345 009(D48) Correspondence, msgs, contracts, requirements, etc. 1 Oct 39/31 Aug 43, pg. 19/201

<sup>216</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48) pg. 44-47/201

<sup>217</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48) pg. 47/201

Halifax, N.S., August 2 1.

Lieut. R. F. Peach, R.C.E.,  
Works Officer,  
Halgrave, N. S.

Engineer Services,  
Sand Point - Guysborough Co., N.S.  
Claim - Mrs. C. Carter

Herewith copy of letter from Mrs.  
Clementine Carter and addressed to Mr. Ralston,  
regarding removal of gravel, etc. from her  
property.

A full report on this matter is re-  
quired at once.

*J*

HFP

Major, R.C.E.  
D.E.C., M.D. No. 6.

Mrs. Carter's situation was not to be handled routinely. In two short paragraphs, Lt Peach's superiors advised him that Minister Ralston instigated the inquiry, and that it was to be dealt with "at once".

The weight of ministerial attention now squarely focused all towards young Peach's efforts to resolving the matter. That inquiry became Lt Peach's number one priority for on 6 August, Peach presented his findings:

Mrs. C. Carter  
Claim

1. Ref. your W.E. 1-2-3, d/ 2-8-41, concerning the m/n.
2. As near as can be ascertained, the yardage taken from Sand Point Beach by Military personnel is as follows:  
By 86th Hvy. Bty. R.C.A..... 10 yds.  
By G.&S. Foresters..... 5 yds.  
Gravel taken by the 86th Hvy. Bty. was for the purpose of filling sand bags. That taken by the G.&S. Foresters for road construction.
3. In this district, gravel is being purchased on the beach for the sum of 5 cents per yard. On this basis, Mrs. Carter would have a claim of 75 cents for gravel.
4. Damage to pasture fence in question, was the removal of one pole from fence crossing beach at Sand Pt. This was taken down to permit the hauling of material to Eddy Point when under construction, and at present the only approach to D.E.L. Emplacements. Cost of replacing fence post by gate will be NIL.

The work required to resolve Mrs. Carter's claim far exceeded the assessed value of 75 cents, but it had to be done, nonetheless.

Lt Peach's assessment was duly forwarded the same day, 6 August, through his chain of command at Mulgrave to MD 6 at Halifax. The claim was reviewed and the value of the cost of removal of gravel, accepted. MD 6 then directed that this assessment be submitted to Mrs. Carter and payment made. They also wanted to secure her approval with a view to get her clearance from all further damages. Perhaps this was the true value and necessity of Mrs. Carter's claim. In the event that further damage was done to her property, she now had a benchmark and documentation, that adequately stated its condition at a given point in time. In fact, it was a very astute move!<sup>218</sup>

The hook was found in the further use of her land. There was only one approach to some local military emplacements and that was through her pasture. MD 6 wanted to know if an agreement was in place for the use of her road, as well as the action taken to cover this approach. Lt Peach's trials in this matter were far from over, perhaps they were only just beginning to build and grow. It became the ongoing battle concerning the continual resolution of real property issues found in such examples as the "Mr. Doe" and "Mrs. Carter" properties!

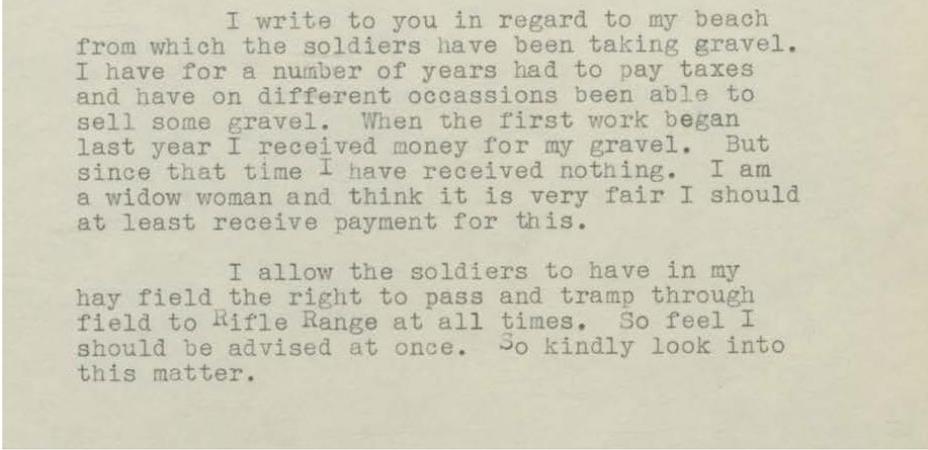
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<sup>218</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48) pg. 49-50/201

There was a real need for defence works in the area. The engineers had to use what was at hand on the ground to that purpose. The point of defence after all, is to defend from attack. That often requires major alterations that may not necessarily be suitable to the landowner. Sometimes though, it is the immediate military necessity to do what is necessary, that is required. The ground must be made suitable for the needs of a unit tasked to defend a given area.

It all came to a head at Sand Point 9 August 1941. Lt Peach was finally able to contact Mr. Doe, who agreed to a \$100 per annum rental on the 6.9 acres of property. Additionally, he agreed to the military use of an additional 3.5 acres of his property as a separate parcel. It was all part of a new agreement that anticipated a need if there was ever a military requirement to do so. All in all, by 18 August 1941, an agreement to lease a total 10.45-acre parcel of land was finally concluded with the "Doe" Family.<sup>219</sup>

But the success of these two cases stimulated similar claims. Another quickly followed from another resident from Sand Point. A letter from Helen M. Halpenny was received at National defence Headquarters Ottawa, 11 July 1941.<sup>220</sup>



I write to you in regard to my beach from which the soldiers have been taking gravel. I have for a number of years had to pay taxes and have on different occasions been able to sell some gravel. When the first work began last year I received money for my gravel. But since that time I have received nothing. I am a widow woman and think it is very fair I should at least receive payment for this.

I allow the soldiers to have in my hay field the right to pass and tramp through field to Rifle Range at all times. So feel I should be advised at once. So kindly look into this matter.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48) pg. 56/201

<sup>220</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 59/201

It became crystal clear that local residents desired compensation; not only for the use of their land, but also for any damages that might be incurred in the use thereof. Such concerns were not unreasonable.

The principal issues were gravel and right to passage across property. Key to Mrs. Halpenny's claim was indeed the use of her land. Soldiers had to pass through her hayfield to a local rifle range. Considering that there were great concentrations of military personnel in the area, the foot traffic alone would have amounted to considerable wear and tear over time.

Mrs. Halpenny had to be properly recompensed for the use of her land. Damage to any hayfield at the time, was a very real and considerable economic blow to any local farmer. The shortfalls would have to be made up from elsewhere or through reduction of the farm's output in kind.

The issues may seem trivial, humorous and trifling in the global context of the war. But they were serious issues to Sand Point's residents whose livelihoods were affected!

Still it seemed that everybody from Sand Point was getting on the band wagon. By 12 August, DND's records documented an additional Complainant, Mr. C Carter.

All these complaints prompted letters that required regular updates and action. It added greatly to the burden of Lt Peach and others in the quest for determining proper compensation for use and damages.<sup>221</sup>

It devolved into a growing litany of woe in trying to resolve the many issues.<sup>222</sup> By example;

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 60-61/201

<sup>222</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 64-65/201

District Engineer Officer,  
Military District No. 6,  
Halifax, N.S.

Gravel - Sand Point  
Hauled from property  
owned by Mrs. C. Carter.

1. As directed by you in your letter W.E. 1-2-7, dated 8/8/41, Mrs. Carter was contacted ref. claim against the Dept. of Nat. Defence for gravel taken from her property.
2. Her accounts, upon arrival in this office, were not made out in the prescribed form and had to be returned to her for correction. Immediately the corrected invoices are returned to us they will be forwarded to your office.
2. The damage referred to by her, in her correspondence with you, was the removal of one panel of fence. She asked to have the removed panel replaced by a gate which I agreed to do.
3. She also agreed to allow the Military to cross the beach, owned by her, a distance of 300 yards. Up to the present she can not be persuaded to sign any agreement to that effect.

*R.F. Peach*  
(R.F. Peach) Lt.-R.C.E.  
Works Officer, Canso Defence Area

/PMS

The problem with Mrs. Carter's claim was simply a matter of proper paperwork required by the military on the one hand, and her willingness to oblige them on the other. Her accounts were not made out in the proper format and had to be returned.

The other problem was one of personality. Quite simply, Mrs. Carter was reluctant to do the necessary paperwork. She verbally agreed to the use of her land and to the repairs required for damages done to her property. But beyond verbal agreement, Mrs. Carter was definitely wary of contracts and legal paperwork, so she refused to sign anything up until that point.

Perhaps Mrs. Carter's reluctance was simply due to the complexity of the paperwork. It was likely incomprehensible to her. Government paperwork is never plainly stated or expressed in simple terms. She may have feared the loss of the use of her property in signing a contract with DND. A reasonable fear, especially if you couldn't afford your own lawyer to interpret a contract for you. You simply protected your own interest by ignoring the bureaucracy. It was a sound strategy to ignore the government's carpet baggers, which frustrated them greatly!

The problem was that frustration finally settled, through the chain of command, onto the shoulders of the lowest level, always the inevitable destination, the desk of Lt Peach. It bubbled and fomented in the nasty little reminders, sent continually to the Mulgrave works officer for additional information, that added to his constant chagrin.<sup>223</sup>

The month of August 1941 must have been a personal purgatory for the works officer, as Lt Peach resolved all the issues one by one. But finally, Peach concluded the necessary paperwork, with the necessary contracts. It had a domino effect that saw the following signed, sealed, and delivered:<sup>224</sup>

1. Mr. Doe, Sand Point – letter 27 August 1941,
2. Ms. Halpenny/ Ms. Carter, letter 28 August 1941; and
3. letters in matter of final paperwork on issues concerning the Doe Property (August-September 1941)

Now that the property issues were properly secured, it was left for Lt Peach to bring power to these outlying posts. The positions at Sand Point were a case in point. It would require 2200 feet of new lines to bring power there at a cost of some \$375. It would require some 10 poles and four guy wires with an installation of one 5Kva Transformer to bring power to that location.<sup>225</sup>

It was a small project, trivial by today's standards. But \$375 was a substantial sum, when converted to current dollars today whose value is approximately \$41,250. The poverty line was near \$1000 per year for a family of four in the day. This points to the desperation and plight of many. This benchmark did not reflect

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 66-67/201

<sup>224</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 67-74/201

<sup>225</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 75-76/201

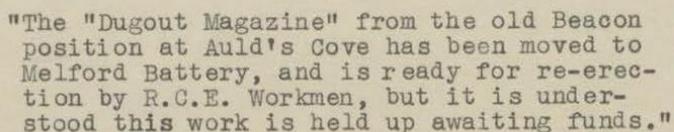
reality. Many desperate wage earners average income was often far less than \$1000 per year. In fact, it was closer to \$500 per year for most, if a job was had at all.<sup>226</sup>

Times were notoriously hard on Canada's East Coast during the Depression. The hard times prompted and stimulated the need for the Cooperative and Antigonish movements. These movements were premised on the improvement of the human condition, in a drive to overcome unemployment and extreme poverty. We can safely assume then, that many lived at or below the poverty line given the efforts of Father Coady and other notables of the movement in the area. Few likely had the means to bring power to their home at such a cost.

The trials of bringing power to these outlying points in the Canso Defence Area may be indicative of the benefit of a military presence to the local area. Power was now made readily available for use by local people at lower cost, when a military unit was situated nearby. Also, as the military extended or broadened the range, it likely made electricity affordable for other local residents, who up until this point, may not have had the economic power or means to bring it closer on their own accord. And with electricity came modern conveniences and indoor plumbing.

The resolution of the electrical requirements largely brought the outstanding contract and accommodations matters from 1939 on to a close.

Still, this file was constantly active during the war. In evidence, 1942 began interesting enough. There was a change of positions coming. One of 86<sup>th</sup> Coast positions was to be moved from its present location at Auld Cove to Havre Boucher.<sup>227</sup>



"The "Dugout Magazine" from the old Beacon position at Auld's Cove has been moved to Melford Battery, and is ready for re-erection by R.C.E. Workmen, but it is understood this work is held up awaiting funds."

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<sup>226</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression - 1929-1939* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), pg. 9

<sup>227</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 82/201

The decision to move the Battery from Auld Cove occurred sometime between 19 and 24 March. It was a matter of some concern and urgency as the gun fire traversed a public highway. Perhaps this was the reason that necessitated the move and change of position.

The illusion that there would be peace on the accommodation/property rental file was soon shattered when a solicitor's letter was received from Wilkie Grant, Barrister 11 April 1942. He was acting on the interests of two clients; James F Meagher, Melford Site, Guysborough County and, James A MacDonald, Beacon Site, Antigonish County.

Once again, a common theme emerged surrounding the questions of clear title and use of the land by the Department of National Defence in their defence works.<sup>228</sup>

There was a problem regarding ownership in who held clear title to the lands in question. In the case of the Meagher application, it was a boundary dispute. One litigant, the Scotia Lumber Company, was alleged to not holding title to a property.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 85/201

<sup>229</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 86/201

Dear Sir:

Re: Acquisition of lands - Melford Bty.

Receipt of your letter dated 11th April 1942 requesting descriptions of lands to be acquired from James F. Meagher at Melford, and James A. MacDonald at Beacon Battery. The Beacon Battery property is the subject of a separate letter.

The total property required by the Department at Melford Battery site is as shown outlined in red on the enclosed plan.

The lot shown outlined in yellow and marked "A", containing approximately 3.5 acres, according to information received by our surveyor, is in dispute as far as ownership is concerned. It would appear that this plot was originally sold to "Terminal City" by John T. Meagher, and subsequently taken over by the Scotia Lumber Co. This same piece of property was also included in the sale of a piece of land by the Municipality of Guysborough for taxes, and was purchased by James F. Meagher, Deed recorded in the Registry of Deeds in Guysborough, Book #40, Folios 31 and 32, 7th Sept. 1932.

The portion of the site shown hatched in yellow is the property of J.F.Meagher and contains 1.51 acres, more or less (description attached hereto)

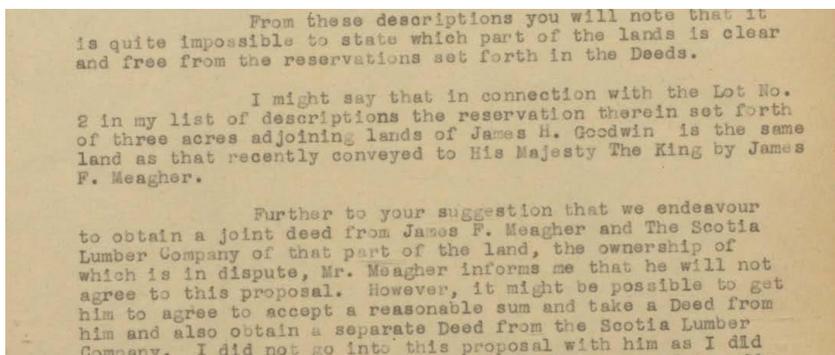
The remainder of the site, as ascertained by our surveyor is the property of the Scotia Lumber Company, and contains approximately 16.45 acres.

Obviously, the Meagher application was the subject of an ongoing boundary dispute between the litigants. It was left to the Department of National Defence to resolve through their own surveys and findings.

The DND letter of 17 April 1942 was indicative of the economic and fiscal state of affairs for many property owners in Guysborough County, and their inability to pay property taxes. It showed from DND's records, that the Scotia Lumber Company bought the property originally owned by John T Meagher at a tax sale. The total area amounted to 16.45 acres. John F Meagher was only able to recover

a small portion of that 16.5 acres; 1.5 acres, at a later date. This smaller holding was likely the land for the family home.<sup>230</sup>

The dispute on the Meagher property was never resolved satisfactorily to all litigants. But matters did come to a head 25 June 1942. Mr. Wilkie, Barrister for the two litigants found that in the Meagher case, a title search of the records proved difficult to proving anything conclusive concerning the Meagher sale. Property and title transfers had often been improperly recorded and maintained since 1889. Often several titles were found for the same property.<sup>231</sup>

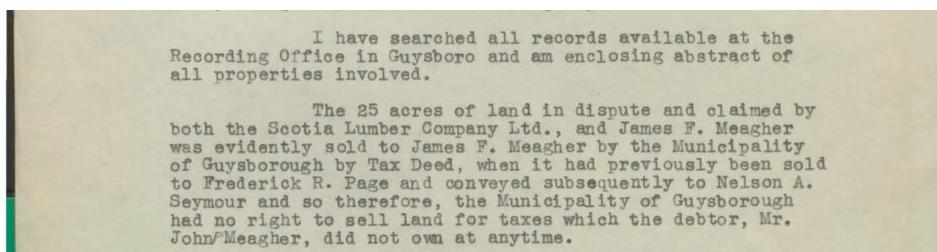


From these descriptions you will note that it is quite impossible to state which part of the lands is clear and free from the reservations set forth in the Deeds.

I might say that in connection with the Lot No. 2 in my list of descriptions the reservation therein set forth of three acres adjoining lands of James H. Goodwin is the same land as that recently conveyed to His Majesty The King by James F. Meagher.

Further to your suggestion that we endeavour to obtain a joint deed from James F. Meagher and The Scotia Lumber Company of that part of the land, the ownership of which is in dispute, Mr. Meagher informs me that he will not agree to this proposal. However, it might be possible to get him to agree to accept a reasonable sum and take a Deed from him and also obtain a separate Deed from the Scotia Lumber Company. I did not go into this proposal with him as I did

A means was attempted to circumvent the title problems by offering Mr. John F. Meagher compensation. Mr. Meagher rejected the offer lest it interfere with his ongoing fight for clear title. Rightly so, for it was found later 29 May 1943 that<sup>232</sup>:



I have searched all records available at the Recording Office in Guysboro and am enclosing abstract of all properties involved.

The 25 acres of land in dispute and claimed by both the Scotia Lumber Company Ltd., and James F. Meagher was evidently sold to James F. Meagher by the Municipality of Guysborough by Tax Deed, when it had previously been sold to Frederick R. Page and conveyed subsequently to Nelson A. Seymour and so therefore, the Municipality of Guysborough had no right to sell land for taxes which the debtor, Mr. John Meagher, did not own at anytime.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 86-89/201

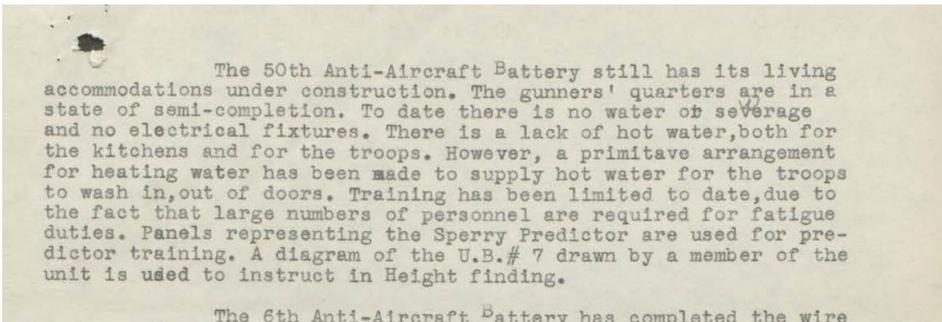
<sup>231</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 149 -150/201

<sup>232</sup> Ibid DHH 345 009(D48), Pg. 180-189/201

It all proved that procurement and property acquisition in the Guysborough Area was very problematic and would be the bane of any in military authority, who had the mischance and responsibility for resolving the many issues. The “Battle of Administration” proved to be the never ending one for all who had served in the Canso Area.

Despite moments of sheer terror or excitement, life went on as usual in the Strait of Canso Defence Area in 1942-43. It had moments of piquancy, interest, and turmoil, that was normal to running any major enterprise. The mountain behind the molehill lay with the paperwork that made it all go.

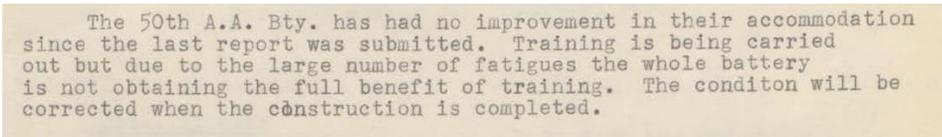
Behind the operational situation, the day to day plod continued and administrative matters still had to be dealt with. Of the continuing problems, one of the most important always was accommodation. Even as late as 1942, there remained ongoing problems and issues surrounding proper quarters as noted 5 November:



The 50th Anti-Aircraft Battery still has its living accommodations under construction. The gunners' quarters are in a state of semi-completion. To date there is no water or sewerage and no electrical fixtures. There is a lack of hot water, both for the kitchens and for the troops. However, a primitive arrangement for heating water has been made to supply hot water for the troops to wash in, out of doors. Training has been limited to date, due to the fact that large numbers of personnel are required for fatigue duties. Panels representing the Sperry Predictor are used for predictor training. A diagram of the U.B.# 7 drawn by a member of the unit is used to instruct in Height finding.

The 6th Anti-Aircraft Battery has completed the wire

Many soldiers were still accommodated in what was essentially, construction under repair. Facilities were both cold and sub-standard. The accommodation problem proved to be an ongoing one, never ending, and went on relentlessly without resolution (11 November 1942 Sitrep):<sup>233</sup>

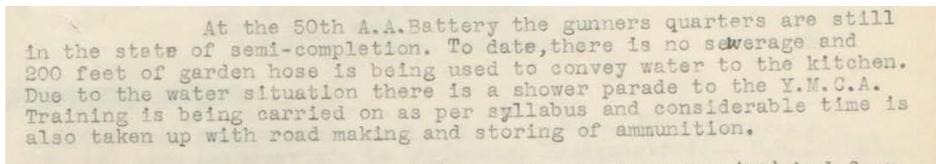


The 50th A.A. Bty. has had no improvement in their accommodation since the last report was submitted. Training is being carried out but due to the large number of fatigues the whole battery is not obtaining the full benefit of training. The condition will be corrected when the construction is completed.

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 85 & 90 of 123

Even as late as 25 November, ablutions and sanitary water supplies were less than satisfactory:



At the 50th A.A. Battery the gunners quarters are still in the state of semi-completion. To date, there is no sewerage and 200 feet of garden hose is being used to convey water to the kitchen. Due to the water situation there is a shower parade to the Y.M.C.A. Training is being carried on as per syllabus and considerable time is also taken up with road making and storing of ammunition.

It all added to the discomfort and misery. Something had to be done to occupy the attention of the troops. Their focus had to be diverted elsewhere lest it gravely affect their morale. So, training took a serious turn and became, the necessary diversion, to provide moments of excitement and interest.<sup>234</sup>

One moment of excitement, if not sheer terror for an innocent air crew, happened around 18 November. It was recorded; "Last week the Regiment de Joliette put 194 all ranks through A. & M. G. firing with Lysander and drogue. Each man fired 56 rounds. Results were moderately successful. One hit was registered on the Lysander entering the aircraft at the motor cowling passing up to behind the pilot's instrument panel. Little damage was done. The electrical starter cable was cut."

The aircraft continued its line and repairs were made after the practice was completed. There were safety officers present. The accident was investigated. It was concluded that the accident occurred when the plane was coming towards the firers at an angle and a stray bullet hit the motor.<sup>235</sup>

It all added to the realism of what they were doing and what they were supposed to accomplish there. But a pilot was almost killed, and a valuable aircraft lost!

It was all about keeping on top and up to form. All small details were considered, even to the extent of ammunition holdings. On 23 November 1942, 50<sup>th</sup> Hy (Heavy) AA Bty, RCA reported its ammunition holdings for the week ending 21 November 1942 as:<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 96 of 123

<sup>235</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 96 of 123

<sup>236</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 93 of 123

50th Hy. A.A. Battery, R.C.A.

Total ammunition available at this date is  
7774 rds. H.E. 1826 required to complete establishment.

Condition of guns is good.

It has been found that the ammunition still has  
a tendency to "sweat" and will do so until some temper-  
ature control system is installed.

But behind the scenes of the 23 November report, was an unreported and a serious incident.

50<sup>th</sup> Hy AA Bty, RCA failed to report the accidental shooting of a trooper. It was noted as an addendum in correspondence, 11 December 1942.<sup>237</sup>

2. It has come to my attention indirectly  
that P.78427, Pte. J.A. Cook, 50th A.A. Bty, South  
Bar, was accidentally shot on Nov 23 at the Ammuni-  
tion Magazine there.

3. This might be considered as a subject  
for comment in Appendix "A" of your Weekly Situa-  
tion Report since it is an unusual circumstance  
and of interest to this Headquarters and to D.O.C.,  
M.D. No. 6.

Perhaps this failure to report such a serious incident was lost in the ongoing bureaucratic struggle. Accommodation problems continued unabated! In the meantime, concerning the accidental shooting, 50 AA Bty provided this update to its higher headquarters only 2 December that year:

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 110 of 123

At the 50th A.A.Bty., Cossitts Lake, the officers have moved into the new quarters which are without electric lights or sewerage and in a semi-completed state. Hot and cold water are now available in the sergeants quarters, but no light fixtures have been installed. Water is now available in the gunners' quarters, but hot water is not available as yet. The Battery office is without lighting fixtures and temporary wiring is being used for lighting purposes. Training to increase the physical fitness of the men is being carried out, and advantage being taken of the fine weather for forced and cross country route marches. Work is progressing favorably on the gun emplacements.

The failure to report the accidental shooting may well have been a bureaucratic oversight. 50<sup>th</sup> Hy AA Bty, RCA was basically living under “wooden” canvas and, possibly the wider needs of the battery may have taken precedence! But seemingly lost on the battery was the welfare and concern for the soldier. Then perhaps too, they wanted the matter swept under the carpet, and if left unreported, the incident may have been lost and forgotten.

The unreported “Pte Cooke Incident” prompted a review and response from the GoC himself. In a letter dated 11 December 1942, he lambasted the unit and sent a bruiser of a letter as the Senior Officer, Commanding a Command, to his immediate subordinates.

PA A.C.S.11-2-1

Secret Halifax, N.S., 11 December 42

Commander,  
Sydney-Canso Defences,  
Sydney, N.S.

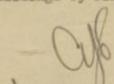
Weekly Situation Report

Further reference to this Headquarters letter numbered as above and dated 4 Nov 42.

2. It has come to my attention indirectly that P.78427, Pte. J.A. Cook, 50th A.A. Bty, South Bar, was accidentally shot on Nov 23 at the Ammunition Magazine there.

3. This might be considered as a subject for comment in Appendix "A" of your Weekly Situation Report since it is an unusual circumstance and of interest to this Headquarters and to D.O.C., W.D. No. 6.

4. Other unusual circumstances, for example, the destruction of buildings by fire, etc., should also be included.

  
 (W.H.P. Elkins)  
 Major-General  
 G.O.C.-in-C., Atlantic Command.

The content of this letter may seem mild and inoffensive to the reader, but in military parlance what MGen Elkins conveyed to the Commander, Sydney-Canso Defence Area, was how to suck eggs!

The fact is, this was an admonishment on how to do the job. It was a missive, that had received the undivided attention of the GoC, was written and

signed by him, not just some staff officer. That is what truly takes the cake here!

Beyond the GoC's admonishment, the on-going saga of 50<sup>th</sup> AA Bty continued.  
Written on 23 December 1942: <sup>238</sup>

The 50th A.A. Battery held a firing practice on 14th Dec. 42, when 25 other ranks were practiced at firing Geographical Barrage without instruments. Shower baths are still not completed in the gunners quarters, light fixtures are still of temporary nature and sinks are not installed in the kitchens. Small Arms Practice was carried out by 53 other ranks on 15th Dec. 42, at the Sydney Rifle Range.

#### A. And other news

The 6th A.A. Battery's new accommodation at Westmount is ready for occupation. Holdup in actual handing over is due to lack of water facilities. The new water pump has been installed but can not be put in operation for a few days. The M.I. garage erected by unit personnel is now approximately 80 per cent completed. Minor repairs, grease, etc. are now being carried out.

At 0345 hrs, 20-12-42, the Officers Mess and quarters Fort Melford, occupied by two officers and two mess servants burned. The cause of the fire was believed to be a faulty flue in the kitchen chimney. There was no local fire brigade available and there was a complete failure of the Fort water supply due to the fact that the switch for the electric pump was located in the burnt building. The loss of D.N.D. property and equipment and personal belongings is estimated at approximately \$5000.

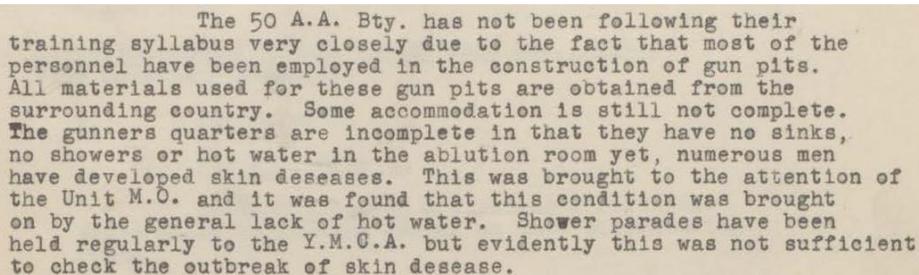
*no fire  
brigade!*

Service in the Canso Area was far from a pleasant experience. Officers serving there, suffered as well. They too shared in the annoyance and privations from the dismal construction effort and difficulties too. Added to their burden were the unexpected calamities.

The Officers Mess at Port Melford burned to the ground 0345 hrs on 20 December 1942. The Mess burned because the water supply failed with a total loss to DND; as well as personal property, to the tune of \$5000, a princely sum in those days.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 Jun 42 to Jan 43, Pg. 113 of 123

All these difficulties and calamities had an impact. The progress in construction and lack of quarters for 50 AA Bty affected training.<sup>239</sup>

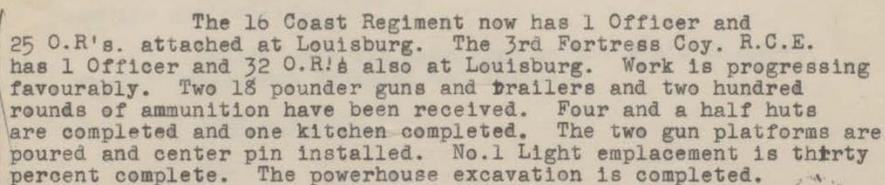


The 50 A.A. Bty. has not been following their training syllabus very closely due to the fact that most of the personnel have been employed in the construction of gun pits. All materials used for these gun pits are obtained from the surrounding country. Some accommodation is still not complete. The gunners quarters are incomplete in that they have no sinks, no showers or hot water in the ablution room yet, numerous men have developed skin diseases. This was brought to the attention of the Unit M.O. and it was found that this condition was brought on by the general lack of hot water. Shower parades have been held regularly to the Y.M.C.A. but evidently this was not sufficient to check the outbreak of skin disease.

Men suffered because of poor accommodations. The consequences were seen in increased outbreaks of various skin ailments.

All this happened under threat of attack while the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence raged on! By the time December 1942 rolled about, the Battle was largely over. Still the threat had to be prepared for and contingencies planned and made.

One contingency was the preparations required in Louisbourg, NS:<sup>240</sup>



The 16 Coast Regiment now has 1 Officer and 25 O.R.'s attached at Louisbourg. The 3rd Fortress Coy. R.C.E. has 1 Officer and 32 O.R.'s also at Louisbourg. Work is progressing favourably. Two 18 pounder guns and trailers and two hundred rounds of ammunition have been received. Four and a half huts are completed and one kitchen completed. The two gun platforms are poured and center pin installed. No.1 Light emplacement is thirty percent complete. The powerhouse excavation is completed.

The of 3<sup>rd</sup> Fortress Coy RCE was quartered at Louisbourg. This detachment of men was indicative of the extent of the works, the presence of the army, and the state of vigilance to meet the actual U-boat and enemy threat present in the area, real or not.

<sup>239</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Sydney Canso DEFs., Weekly Situation Report, file 321.009 (D124), December 42 to Jun 43 vol. 3, pg. 4 of 111.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid file 321 009 D124 December 42 to Jun 43 vol. 3, pg. 4/111.

There was always a battle raging in and around the Canso Area. Sometimes it was with the enemy, at other times, the battle was the one waged amongst us; the one in making it all go smoothly and efficiently. It was the latter that was the continuous battle fought throughout the war, the battle of administration, also known as “ ... rolls down hill.”

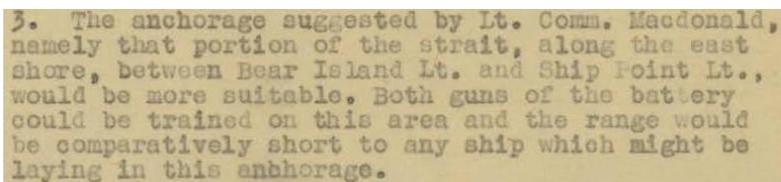
#### 14 - 1943 "The Bumps in the Night!"

The Strait of Canso was ice free by late April 1943. The Royal Canadian Navy duly notified the Officer Commanding, Canso Defence Area, that examination services would begin in earnest on the thirtieth of that month. A new examination season was about to begin, and the troops were removed from their winter rest and hibernation. The lull was about to end.

Full manning of guns began in preparation for that duty. 86th Coast Bty was moved back from winter quarters and in place by 30 April. The guns were once again ready for action and so with that, the operational season began in earnest.

All went to plan for a time. Then, the routine of examination services, was disrupted somewhat early June. The RCN wished to use Turbalton Bay as its new anchorage site. This required the attention and professional assessment of the guns. The gunners determined that Turbalton Bay was out of range, and thus the guns were unable to provide either coverage or protection in this area.

The RCN was subsequently advised:<sup>241</sup>



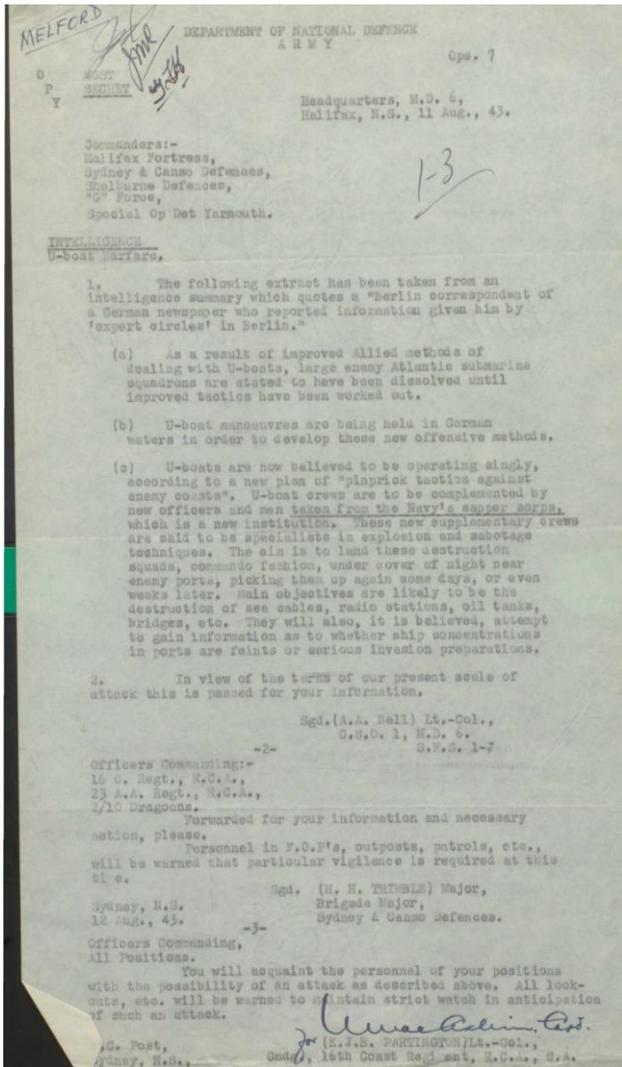
3. The anchorage suggested by Lt. Comm. Macdonald, namely that portion of the strait, along the east shore, between Bear Island Lt. and Ship Point Lt., would be more suitable. Both guns of the battery could be trained on this area and the range would be comparatively short to any ship which might be laying in this anchorage.

Siting the guns correctly was extremely important. A one-page precis of an intelligence summary dated 11 August 1943, provided the reasons why, in some depth. The summary contained an updated strategic situation facing Canadian

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<sup>241</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 59 of 75

military forces both in the Canso Defence Area and other sensitive areas at that time.



The dreaded U-boat remained a threat of grave concern. And yet at this point in the war, the Allies had learned from reliable sources in Berlin that U-boat Command had changed its tactics. It seemed that the Allies had gained some ascendancy in dealing with the threat and of the destructive power of U-boat packs.<sup>242</sup>

These recent intelligence summaries though, marked a change and a turning point in the Battle of the Atlantic. It was indicative that the Allies were winning.<sup>243</sup>

New tactics, technology, and force structure now forced the Germans to adopt new methods in U-

<sup>242</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45, pg. 56 of 75

<sup>243</sup> Richard Doherty, *Churchill's Greatest Fear - The Battle of The Atlantic, 3 September 1939 to 7 May 1945*, Pen and Sword Military Books Ltd., 2015, pg. 208

boat warfare to avoid certain destruction.

Despite allied preparations and dispositions that were now achieving notable success, the battle was far from over. The final conclusion, remained unclear to us at that point. But what was of great importance was the prompted change in German tactics.

It was now determined that U-boats would act singly with special forces, if necessary. This was the notable change, that was the point, and of special interest and of grave concern to those in the Canso Defence Area. Special missions and purpose-built attacks could be expected, and then, should be prepared for. There was good cause for concern.

Many examples of devastation caused by offensive power of U-boats were extant; especially to Canadian shipping. Several merchant ships from the Canadian National Steamship (CNS) line were lost over the course of the war. Their individual loss, and the methods employed, deserved special attention for consideration by Canadian authorities.<sup>244</sup>

The CNS fleet included the Lady Ships who provided service between Canada and the Islands of the West Indies. Many of their ships were familiar to the residents of the Canso area; as they often passed through there on their way to the West Indies. One of their ports of call, was Castries at St. Lucia. It was a favoured port for all the Lady Ships as they were easily accommodated and able to lie comfortably along side its dock.

Port Castries was an easy spot to load and discharge cargo because of its modern facilities very similar to those found in the Canso and Sydney areas. St Lucia was a product of bygone days though. Castries was once used principally as a coaling station.<sup>245</sup> It was here where ships on their way to and from southern latitudes were fueled. So, it was well built and maintained. It became a favoured port for

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<sup>244</sup> Gerry Madigan, “**They that go down to the sea in ships**” - *The Life and Times of Captain Morris O’Hara (Isaacs Harbour, NS), Master of Lady Nelson during the Second World War*, Guysborough Journal, July- August 2018 (serialized)

<sup>245</sup> Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, M.B.E., *The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada’s West Indies Merchant Fleet*, Canadian Marine Transportation Centre, Dalhousie University, 1980, pg. 33

crew rest and recreation. It was also well known to all seasoned mariners, including Germany.

The Lady Nelson, and her sisters, Lady Drake, Lady Hawkins, Lady Somers and Lady Rodney, became Canadian goodwill ambassadors to the Caribbean Islands while hauling both freight and passengers to and from there. The Lady Ships were a “symbol of the ties that existed between the mainland countries and the islands they touched.”<sup>246</sup>



SS Lady Rodney in St. John's, NF in May 1943. In peacetime, this ship sailed the Caribbean with 130 passengers and cargo, during the war she was converted to carry 500 soldiers. Photo taken from HMCS WASAGA.  
Roger Litwiller Collection, courtesy Ross Milligan, RCNR. (RTL-REM165)

It happened that Lady Nelson was torpedoed in the Harbour of Port Castries, St. Lucia in March 1942. Only a short two months later, the Lady Drake was sunk and lost too, torpedoed a mere one day's travel from Bermuda.

Luckily, Lady Nelson was raised from the bottom and towed to Mobile, Alabama 11 May. She was converted for other duties as a hospital ship and relaunched once again April

1943.<sup>247</sup>

How Lady Nelson was lost was a textbook case of German daring. The initiative of the captain of one lone boat, was likely of special interest to Canadian military authorities.

The war had raged on for well over two years as 10 March 1942 approached. In Canada, there was evidence of massive destruction all along its Atlantic coast as convoys exited Halifax for Europe. Our convoys were attacked and torpedoed relentlessly.

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<sup>246</sup> Fred Sankoff, Canadian **National Steamships 1946-1958**, The Scanner – The Monthly News Bulletin of the Toronto Marine Historical Society, v. 1, n. 2 (May 1968)  
Source: [www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/Documents/Scanner/01/02/default.asp?ID=c004](http://www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/Documents/Scanner/01/02/default.asp?ID=c004)  
Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>247</sup> Ibid Fred Sankoff, 1968

The eastern seaboard was swarmed by marauding submarine captains, who sunk an average of 400,000 tons of shipping per month. The sound and sights of their carnage was easily heard, seen, and found in the flotsam of lost cargo and wreckage all round Halifax and her approaches. It all floated freely to shore. In fact, 1942 proved to be one of the worst years of the war.<sup>248</sup>

But the lessons of the dangers lie further afield, at Port Castries, St Lucia. U-161 had been watching the harbour waiting for a likely target on the evening of 10 March. Albrecht Achilles commander of U-161 found two favourable targets in Lady Nelson and Umtata. Achilles did not hurry, he waited for the protection of the night, then began his approach to attack the harbour at 1030 PM that evening.

U-161 inched its way into the harbour entrance, careful not to alert its defences; and struck hard.<sup>249</sup> Achilles fired two torpedoes into the harbour at 4:49 AM (German Naval time given). The first torpedo hit Lady Nelson while the other found Umtata.



U-boat Net - Photo courtesy of Library of Contemporary History, Stuttgart

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 83

<sup>249</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

Devastation reigned. There was more to Achilles' attack than a straight in and out approach. His attack was brilliantly conducted.

Achilles carefully navigated U-161 along the harbour through submarine nets and sighted the Lady Nelson. But his approach had not gone unnoticed: "The U-boat had been seen entering the harbour by a police lookout at Vigie Lighthouse, but due to faulty communication no alarm could be given before any torpedoed was fired."

His luck held despite being spotted at Vigie Lighthouse. The lookout's vain attempt to raise an alarm failed because of communication equipment breakdown and malfunction.<sup>250</sup>

Further details were finally made public on U-161's attack when censorship regulations permitted their publication some months later.<sup>251</sup> News accounts suggested that torpedoes were fired by a German raider who blasted his way through a protective submarine net. Three torpedoes were subsequently launched; one each struck and sunk Lady Nelson and Umtata only 50 feet away in shallow waters. A third ship was also attacked but escaped unscathed.

What is most remarkable was the fact that U-161 and Achilles made this daring attack largely unchallenged inside a protected harbour, much like the defences in the Canso Strait area. U-161 then made its way back through the damaged submarine net and out to open sea.<sup>252</sup>

Achilles' subsequent retreat back through the net was both a display of remarkable seamanship and courage. However, some doubt exists if an effective barrier was ever in place.<sup>253</sup>

But this was a siren warning to Canada and its defences on what could be achieved by a selfless, determined leader! Such determination had to be defended against. What happened at Castries, St Lucia in 1942, was very relevant to the defence of the Canso Strait area in 1943. If it happened there, it could also happen here!

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, Mr. Pike (Transcript)\_undated

As it happened though, the Kriegsmarine changed their tactics in 1943. They would no longer be attacking in groups. Allied tactics, technology, hunter groups and aircraft put a dent into, and began decimating the U-boat fleet. The Kriegsmarine had by this time, lost many of its most experienced commanders. They were required to revise their own tactics in order to adequately deal with our threat. They would now be limited to single point attacks. So, it heightened the possibility of attack, all along our coast, foreseen to be conducted by a single mission purpose, and a determined enemy.

The bulk of the enemy's U-boat force was withdrawn to German waters to develop new offensive methods. In the meantime, our forces were expected to anticipate the enemy's single pin prick attacks against our coast. The loss of Lady Nelson and the daring of a U-boat commander in March 1942 was still a very recent memory.

Of great concern to Canada remained the threat of German ancillary forces – sappers. These special forces were foreseen to be dislodged on our shores. Their aim was divined as for either short missions of a single purpose, or for longer missions that involved guerilla tactics for sabotage, to harass and destroy our vital infrastructures.

The point of the British raid on the dry dock at St Nazaire illustrates the case and was still a very recent memory too. Churchill's memoirs reflect, on March 26, 1942 an expedition of destroyers and light coastal craft sailed from Falmouth. That afternoon this force carried with it some 250 commandos.

The Commandos were transported four hundred miles over open seas, then sailed five miles up the Loire estuary to their intended target, the dry dock at St Nazaire. That facility was the prize that could easily hold a ship the size of the Tirpitz.<sup>254</sup> The drydock was vital to German maintenance and repair.

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<sup>254</sup> Winston S. Churchill, **The Second World War – The Hinge of Fate**, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1950, pg. 121-122

On 27 March the British force was in position at the mouth of the Loire estuary. The commandos and ships commenced an attack that began at 00:30 hours on 28 March as the convoy crossed over the shoals at the mouth of the Loire estuary.<sup>255</sup>

The goal was the destruction of the gates of the great lock. All did not go as planned. HMS *Campbeltown* had hidden explosives on board. The fuse of those explosives failed to go off as planned. They only ignited and blew up both the ship and the gates to the drydock the next day raining death and destruction. This explosion destroyed the dry dock and put it out of action. It also caused many enemy casualties.<sup>256</sup>

One could not fail to take notice of such a courageous enterprise. It was unprecedented, unexpected, and executed with great dash and daring. The cost was considerable, yet the results effectively put the dry dock out of service for the remainder of the war. The attack was a blueprint for a German purpose-built mission should they wish to learn the lessons and do so.

Six hundred and eleven men took part in the raid. Only 228 returned to Britain. Of the remainder, some 169 were killed and 215 became prisoners of war. German casualties exceeded 360 dead, some of whom were killed after the raid, when *Campbeltown* exploded.<sup>257</sup> Once again, if it happened there, it could also happen here.

Canada anticipated the employment of German ancillary sapper forces to target oil storage facilities, radio stations, bridges etc. anywhere along Canada's east coast. The raid at St Nazaire pointed the way.

But of prime concern to the OC Canso Defences, apart from facilities, docks, and ferry's, were "sea cables". One such cable was in the Canso Defence Area, at Hazel Hill!

Another vital strategic asset was the RCN LORAN station at Queensport, NS. These two facilities were separately key to communications and navigation. Regardless

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<sup>255</sup> From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, **St Nazaire Raid** , 31 January 2019, at 14:37 (UTC)  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Nazaire\\_Raid#Ramming\\_the\\_dry\\_dock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Nazaire_Raid#Ramming_the_dry_dock)  
Accessed: 6 Apr 2109

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, The Hinge of Fate, 1950

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, Wikipedia, St Nazaire, 31 Jan 2019

there were many rich targets in the Strait area that were very important and vital strategic assets that were also of interest to the enemy.

Thus, all needs were anticipated and appropriately reacted too with the resources at hand. The Canso Defence Area was well placed to anticipate the higher direction that followed. But it was not all a bed of roses. Trouble brewed under the surface.

## 15 - 1943 "The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round"

It is surprising how things changed over the course of the war in reaction to local and global strategic concerns. One notable change came in 1943, the dispositions of the Canso Defence Area were redefined.

Towards the end of that year, all units received an update to their Operational Orders, 16 November. Significantly, these had hardly changed since first issued. This particular amendment was slightly different. It innocuously began with a dissertation on forms and scale of attack that were now anticipated in the Strait area.

The area's operational order was amended to reflect those changes:<sup>258</sup>

"Operational Order No.10/10 d 10-8-43 1. PARA. 1 (c) will be amended to read as follows: -

1 (c) Destruction of specific objectives ashore by naval landing parties or individual agents carried in submarines, limited to a strength of about 50 men at any one landing place."

This slight change updated the strategic situation previously received 10 August 1943. The August order, spanned four pages, was reviewed in some depth. These two separate orders that followed in very close succession, updated the strategic situation in a very short time frame. They were indicative of the evolving threats to Canada, as well as the expected "bumps in the night" in and around the Strait of Canso and Cape Breton.

The 10 August order displayed a very familiar layout to the military trained mind. It employed a prescriptive format that guided the reader in a familiar pattern, leading to the formulation of plans; and eventually, to issuing of military orders.

That format stemmed from the Great War and was still used during basic junior officer training as late as 1979, and that continues probably to this date. The considerations of military mission planning are basically:

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<sup>258</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. Pg. 25 of 75

1. an examination of the conditions under which a mission will be accomplished
2. a survey of available resources
3. consideration of choice and alternative procedures
4. conclude a plan
5. putting a plan into effect.

The format specifies the following steps to putting a plan into effect:

1. Information (Situation)
2. Enemy
3. Friendly forces
4. Intention (Mission)
5. Method (Execution)
6. Roles as Follows (Execution)
7. Perimeter of Defence
8. Preparation and Training
9. Administration (Service Support administration -logistics)
10. Intercommunications (Command and Signals)

The key elements of the order are found in “Information”. It is the first point where a broad discussion of the intents and strengths of the enemy are considered. It was followed by a summary of what forces/resources are available to contend with the enemy’s intent, broadly theirs (enemy), and ours (friendly).

The considerations of these first three steps always lead to the selection of the main aim or mission from which the next logical steps are reviewed and flow. This determines what are necessary to achieving the mission.

There can only be one main aim or mission. There may be objectives, but objectives are only points that support, and always ensure that the main aim is achieved. Therefore, military logic always points to the selection and maintenance of the main aim. That which does not support the main aim is discarded, thus avoiding waste and unnecessary expenditure of time, energy, and resources.

Every commander is responsible in turn for this consideration that flows in the chain of command, from top to bottom in the issuance of military orders. But sometimes that chain is not necessarily clear, lines of command and control can become muddled, requiring clarification of roles and responsibilities.

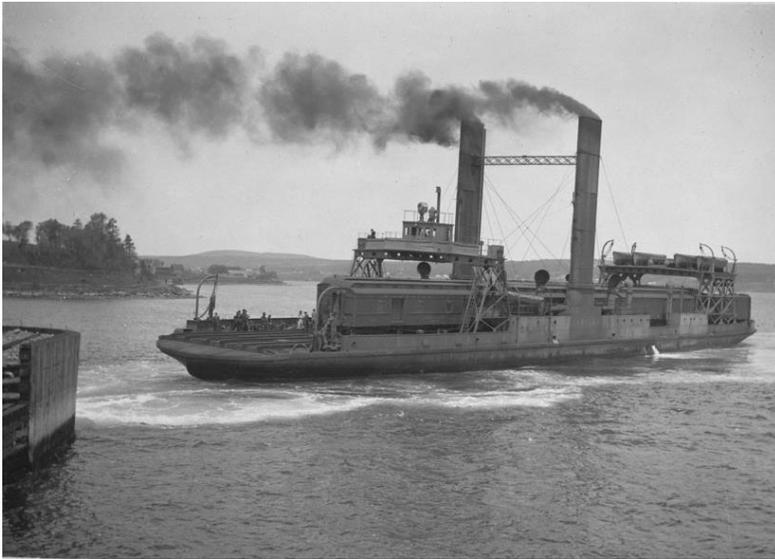
The military assessment of the enemy in 1943 suggested that trouble in the Canso Defence Area would largely come from the sea in the form of small raids. These were anticipated as U-boat operations, mining, or bombardment of shore installations by surface vessels. There was no real sense of imminent invasion in this assessment. The enemy would trouble us in small purpose set raids designed to damage or destroy selected industry, to test our will, and to damage our morale.<sup>259</sup>

Canada's forces were aligned accordingly to meet or thwart that threat. The plan for the Strait of Canso was to deny the enemy access to that Strait. Gun batteries were placed at either end of the channel whose sole purpose was protecting the passage between Nova Scotia's mainland and Cape Breton island.

It was a strategically vital area whose importance lay in the ferry access. It was the principal means for crossing rail traffic in the communication of vital materials to and from Cape Breton. It was the gateway for the flow of steel and coal to the rest of Canada (RoC). It was also a vital gateway in passage of war materiel shipped on convoys departing from Sydney Harbour to Great Britain.

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<sup>259</sup> *ibid*, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. Pg. 25 of 75



C.N.R. Car ferry at Mulgrave, N.S. , Canada. Dept. of Interior / Library and Archives Canada / PA-048073

The principal task for the defence of the Canso Strait lay in a “challenge function” performed by the Navy. The Navy was responsible for investigating all vessels entering this passage and employed two examination vessels. The army physically secured the area with guns to engage offending targets and had sufficient forces on the ground to meet diversionary raids of at least 100 men. Additionally, the Coastal Defence Batteries were placed at either end of the Canso Gut to do so.

All in all, a mighty military force was required and was lodged in Mulgrave/Canso/Port Hawkesbury to meet these anticipated eventualities, and all “bumps in the night”. The sole mission of all these forces was either to harry, destroy, or repulse any attacking enemy force.

The army had many tasks in the area, but nothing was more important than protecting the trans-Atlantic Cable station at Hazel Hill. One rifle platoon was detached and devoted to protecting it through out the war.

But command and control of all friendly forces in the area was vested in the senior infantry officer of the Mulgrave Garrison. He was responsible for fixed defences which largely consisted of the coast artillery batteries, the mobile

reserves, and his infantry dispositions. All these resources were organized in depth to protect vital points. Canadian Army engineers would ultimately be responsible for establishing these positions, for any required demolition, or preparation of defence infrastructure and its maintenance under his command.

The new key element to the operational order of 10 August 1943, was the statement of the intent of enemy forces. As such, all operational orders had to be reviewed through the chain of command, threats reconsidered, and new orders reissued that reflected the change in strategic and operational circumstances or concerns.

The 1943 instruction essentially was a military appreciation for the use of the commanders on the ground. This instruction allowed individual commanders latitude to form their own judgments, then to issue their own orders. But all were driven by the same central aim and direction. That direction was found in paragraph 3 in, "Intention: To destroy or repulse enemy attacking forces."

Paragraph 4 of Operational Order (No.10/10 d 10-8-43), of 10 August concerned "Command". It had to be clarified in the Canso Defence Area that "The senior Combatant Officer will command the Mulgrave garrison."

This generalized statement left much room for doubt as to who was in overall command of the garrison, even as late as 1943! The "Senior Combatant Officer" could have been anyone of the three arms, infantry, artillery, or armoured. As it was, there were two arms in the area infantry and artillery.

Any one of their senior officers could have argued for ultimate command and control of the Area. Secondly the senior combatant officer did not necessarily have to reside in Mulgrave. He could have just as easily commanded from anywhere; such as, Sydney.

This begs the question then, who truly was in command in Mulgrave? Was it the Lieutenant-Colonel at Mulgrave or the Lieutenant-Colonel in Sydney? The issuance of these instructions under the A/Brigade Major, Sydney and Coast was

an opportunity by the gunners at Mulgrave, to once again question local authority in the command and control of the guns.<sup>260</sup>

The senior combatant officer at Sydney was responsible for the entire area; including Sydney, Cape Breton, Canso Defence Area, and Mulgrave. He was a gunner! Consequently, the gunners in the Canso Defence Area likely looked to Sydney for direction, not the “senior combatant officer” at Mulgrave who was an infanteer!<sup>261</sup>

It was a very sensitive issue for the local commander at Mulgrave; who was infantry, while the commander of 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Battery at Sydney was a gunner. What aggravated matters more, both officers held the equivalent rank of Lieutenant- Colonel. This probably caused some confusion along reporting lines at the local level; especially if personalities and service loyalties, were of a concern.

There were no clear indications in any of the records if this was problematic in either official written or formal statements. But many clarifications, were found as amendments and in handwritten notes to formal orders. These cursive amendments, and written clarifications, were indicative of underlying tensions.

The formal orders often bracketed “Combatant” and then were subsequently overwritten and clarified cursively, with “infantry” above combatant, suggesting that clarification was indeed required; time and again!

One specious amendment 2, officially written in 1944, required the acknowledgement in writing by all staff, suggesting lingering problems. It took written direction to clarify and resolve those matters.

It evolved that one key element to Operational Order (No.10/10 d 10-8-43) 1943 clarified the defence perimeter for the Canso Defence Area. It had remained unchanged physically on the ground since 1942, but now it was firmly cast in writing, specifying the units therein. The only changes were the Infantry units set within those boundaries, that were rotated through there over the course of the

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<sup>260</sup> <sup>260</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 47-50 of 75

<sup>261</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 47-50 of 75

war. So, it would seem then that the greatest source of friction concerning “Command and Control”, came at the junctures when the players had changed.

It may have been the expanse of the area that had to be defended that was the basis of this conflict (Figure 1 – Map of Defensible Area). Each combat arm had a duty to perform in function and tasks. But in the event of an emergency, each commander desired the freedom of action to act.

The first units likely to encounter or react to an enemy would have been the coast batteries. Their desire for freedom of action was understandable. Freedom of action meant they could direct all forces available at hand to repel the enemy if necessary. It was never an easy balance to achieve.

Figure 1 – Map of Defensible Area



Map Scale: 1:150,000

Map Source: The Nova Scotia Atlas (5th Ed), Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, Nova Scotia Geomatics Centre, Co-published Formac Publishing Company Limited and the Province of Nova Scotia Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2001

The military dispositions in the Canso Defence Perimeter (Figure 1) were as follows:

1. McNair's Barracks: (inf )
  - a. One Infantry Bn (less 3 Rifle Coy and 1 Det PI)
  - b. Detachments of:
    - i. RCE 3rd Fort Coy
    - ii. RCCS no. 5 Coy AC Sigs
    - iii. RCASC no. 6 Det Coy

- iv. RCAMC Mulgrave Military Hospital
  - v. CPC No. 37 Prov. Coy
  - vi. RCDC
- 2. Port Beacon: (Arty) (Search Lights)
  - a. 86th Coast Bty RCA
  - b. 9 S/L Bty RCA
  - c. 1 Inf Pl
- 3. Fort Melford
  - a. 86th Coast Bty RCA
  - b. 9 S/L Bty RCA
- 4. Sand Point
  - a. 1 Inf Pl.
- 5. Eddy Point
  - a. Det 9 S/L Bty RCA
- 6. Point Tupper
  - a. 1 Inf Pl
- 7. Canso Hazel Hill
  - a. 1 Inf Pl
- 8. Other Services (RCAF – RN)
  - a. RCN Examination Vessels Mulgrave
  - b. RCAF
    - i. Reserve airport
    - ii. Kelly Beach

On 29 September, the OC 86th Coastal Bty received instructions to reduce the manning of his batteries to a new level. This was unexpected, given the recent intelligence concerning the threat to the Canso Defence Area. The instructions stated “the 86th Coast Battery, R.C.A. will cease to man one (1) gun at each Fort, Beacon and Melford, effective 0900 hrs. A.D.T., 1-Oct-43.”

This letter may have been indicative that a new assessment was in the offing for the Strait of Canso Area. It was odd that this reduction ever happened at all. The operational tempo had heated up in the Gulf of St Lawrence in the prior year, 1942. Perhaps it was because that there was so little activity there in 1943, it gave pause for reflection that the threat was contained. Therefore, the managed risk of reduced manning and operational level, was now acceptable.<sup>262</sup>

But there may also have been other factors. A reduced manning level may have been in anticipation of impending needs for replacement forces in Europe. D-day was only some months away. Many units serving in the Canso Defence Area were soon to be transferred to active service to the United Kingdom, thence to Italy and Northwest Europe. The war was heating up, but not in the Canso area. Canada’s needs were elsewhere.

The manning reduction extended down to the Coastal Searchlight Batteries. No units were left untouched in the quest for manpower.

Despite reduced manning, the area still had to be defended. And as such, life went on, and with it, the day to day routine and administration continued as normal. In fact, little had changed in that regard. A direction was conveyed to the OC Searchlight Bty commander by Officer Commanding (OC) 86th Coastal Bty. The OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coastal Bty received some direction 8 October 1943 from his higher headquarters. But with this direction also came an admonishment that stated:

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<sup>262</sup> Major (Ret’d) G.D. Madigan, **Canada’s Unknown Success -Employment Of Land Based Aircraft – The Antisubmarine Role Gulf Of St Lawrence**, 18 October 2011, (madiganstories.com)

“In addition to the foregoing, Battery Commanders are to give the utmost co-operation possible to the navy in the use of the lights.”

This admonition was surprising given the history and the resolutions previously agreed to by all parties concerned. However, it was obvious that there were ongoing and continuing problems with the lights. It soon passed from the ongoing correspondence that these prior solutions were ineffectual to say the least.

Regardless, the searchlight batteries had an important task, to properly identify shipping in the channel at night. Great Britain’s operation at St Nazaire a year earlier was indicative of the importance of the lights. The task force had been illuminated while showing a false flag on their way up the Loire Estuary. It confused the enemy only briefly, but it allowed the task force to make way for a time before it was actively engaged. This confusion allowed *Campbeltown* to breach the dock, and the commandos to do their work.

In spite of St Nazaire, Canada may have been prepared to manage risk in the Canso Defence Area. Still, the searchlights were a source of constant friction with the navy. The RCN once complained that the lights were too bright, now it complained that the lights were not bright enough!

The actual complaint from the RCN revolved about the gaps in the defence now due to improper lighting. Meetings were held locally between the Army and RCN units in the Strait area to coordinate the efforts.

The problem was highlighted by 86th Coast Bty to 16th Coast Regiment RCA in detail. The problems discussed with the RCN on 15 October 1943, put forth the case, “The Navy contend that the exposure of our searchlights, at irregular periods of not more than an hour's interval, does not provide sufficient protection against certain types of ships entering the Straits.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45, pg. Pg. 13 of 75

The RCN complaints were enumerated as; “Their contentions are based on the following technical limitations of their equipment:<sup>264</sup>

(a) The loops cannot pick up wooden ships.

(b) The sensitivity of the loops varies with atmospheric conditions. Under favourable conditions of atmosphere and weather, a ship of 15 tons (steel construction) could be recorded. However with unfavourable conditions 80 tons would be required.

(c) If a vessel is degaussed, three times greater tonnage is required to produce a distinguishable signature on the graph paper. Consequently, a degaussed ship would have to be over 240 tons’ displacement to get a reading under unfavourable conditions. Lt. Ahearn stated that weather conditions during the fall and winter would be almost entirely unfavourable.

(d) The Loop station at Eddy Point does not cover Lennox Passage, and a submarine could enter the straits via this passage on the surface.”

A proposed solution that involved the illumination of Lennox passage at 20 Minute intervals was put forward:<sup>265</sup>

“In view of the above, it is suggested that almost constant sentry and search beams be maintained at Beacon and Melford, for one light only. This would mean exposure every 20 minutes for a 10-minute period, which would not give any small craft time to slip past the X.V. or the battery concerned. The adoption of this policy at Melford could prevent an entry from Lennox Passage.”

Effectively what the Navy now requested, was essentially a reversal of a prior policy, albeit one for a specific area. The danger from an intruding vessel was now far greater than the danger of blinding the crew on the bridge of an RCN vessel. The Royal Navy operation at St Nazaire proved that point. But the OC 86th Coast Bty was not able to make such a change on his own accord. Thus, he sought input

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45, pg. 13 of 75, para 4

<sup>265</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45, pg. 13 of 75, para 5

and direction in this matter from his superiors at 16th Coast Regiment RCA accordingly.

The OC 86th Coast Bty request for clarification in the lighting policy came at an opportune time. The Strait was about to be closed for the winter season. It would set up the procedures for the following year. The point was soon rendered moot.

In the meantime, 16th Coast Regiment RCA issued reduced manning instructions for all batteries, 18 December 1943. They were anticipating the coming closure of the Strait and at Sydney for the winter months. Their instruction implied though, that there was a requirement for level of minimal manning, and that a state of readiness had to be maintained.

Apart from the problems with the RCN, 86th Coast Bty faced an assault on another front, it was one of operational command and control. The issue was brought forward during the time of the Fusiliers du St Laurent's tenure. It probably would have been brought forward earlier by the Irish Regiment of Canada (IRoC), but this unit was only in Canso for a very short while.

In part many of the problems arose from the need for proper planning and a balance of resources. That need was proved to be true and was keenly felt down to units then serving on Canada's east coast and elsewhere. They lived through it month by month.

But ongoing "command and control" problems and boundary issues, truly came to a head in 1943. The problems of command and control created underlying tensions between the gunners and the infantry wherein HQ Sydney Canso Defences had to direct 86th Coast Bty on the matter, 4 November 1943. It was a missive sent from the Brigade Major to OC Melford Bty.

OC 86th Coast Bty was advised, as the battery commander, any Infantry (Inf) Patrol in his area of responsibility would take its orders from the OC Inf Company at McNair Point. This patrol was only attached for the purposes of rations and quarters. The Infantry would only conform to 86th Coast Bty's standing orders while in residence.

Standing Orders involved matters of administration, not operations. Operational control of this unit rested with the OC Inf Coy. And that control was being

contested or tested by the OC 86th Coast Bty. He was attempting to usurp local “operational” control over the Inf units in his area.

16th Coast Regiment RCA began reducing manning, 18 December 1943, in anticipation of the coming closures in the Strait and at Sydney, that coincidentally anticipated the NDHQ order concerning the same issue, received the same day. The Regimental instruction, not so surprising, anticipated that. The military districts had issued a warning order for manning reductions in preparation for the task at hand.<sup>266</sup>

This preliminary instruction was obviously reviewed and reacted to. A plan of action was prepared and issued in anticipation of the higher direction. No time was wasted. If there was some divergence between the initial and final instructions, the units would simply adjust the orders after the fact. In the meantime, they would be prepared.

And so ended 1943. It was a busy year filled with trials and tribulations. 1944 loomed on the horizon and with it, new challenges and changes in circumstances. 1944 was the springboard to a new and perhaps the final phase of the war. The end may have been in sight, but the final outcome, remained uncertain and was always at the tender mercy of the enemy’s will. The enemy’s will was far from broken; and technology, was of a great concern as it might still tip the balance, one way or the other.

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 17-19 of 75

## 16 - 1944 A Pivotal Year

Nineteen forty-four was a key pivotal year for Canada. The Canadian Army, who fought through Sicily and Italy, had already experienced a particularly hard year in 1943. It was about to get a lot worse in 1944.

1943 was a bitter year, with a campaign rife with many battle casualties and losses. The worst of Canada's fighting climaxed at Christmas at Ortona, often referred to by belligerents of both sides, as the "Little Stalingrad". Ortona was a bitter hand to hand, house to house, and street by street struggle that continued throughout the month of December.<sup>267</sup>

Grief was felt by every regiment in the Division for all shared the burden at some point. For some that burden resulted in the ultimate sacrifice and certain death of its young men. The casualty count in Italy was high enough alone. But its consequences were cast lightly as "wastage".



Troopers of "A" Squadron, The Calgary Regiment, who are under enemy shellfire, digging a grave for a comrade who was killed by shrapnel, San Leonardo di Ortona, Italy, 8 December 1943.  
Credit: Lieut. Terry F. Rowe / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-180092

Military records often refer to casualties as "wastage", and wastage, was high at Ortona. In the end, some 176 officers and 2136 other ranks, were either killed or wounded. Ortona was a deadly encounter that proved to be an all or nothing effort.

By the time Ortona was captured, Canadian strength was completely exhausted, and the advance halted for a time.<sup>268</sup> It wasn't to be the end though.

Canadians bravely fought on, and as 1944 began, there was hope for the better. But 1944 proved to be a challenging year for the Canadians in

<sup>267</sup> Gerry Madigan, "They that go down to the sea in ships"- *The Life and Times of Captain Morris O'Hara (Isaacs Harbour, NS), Master of Lady Nelson during the Second World War*, 22 July 2018 Pg.30-37

Serialized Guysborough Journal, 2018  
Published at madiganstories.com

<sup>268</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 213

Italy and then, in North West Europe. Wastage would raise its nasty head once again and precipitate a national crisis, conscription.

Still 1944 began with the Monte Cassino campaign with hope and optimism that the end was in sight, as the war built to a climax. Allied forces attacked the Monte Cassino massif on 4 January in the northward push to Rome. The Canadian Army participated in that campaign, but Monte Cassino was not to be an easy victory. The massif was successfully captured by Polish troops in taking Monastery Hill, some months later, 15 May.

Some days after Monte Cassino, 22 May, the Americans landed at Anzio and the Canadians cut the Hitler line. On 24-25 May 1944, Canadians fought one of their very last major engagements in Italy. They were ordered to make the Melfa Crossing in the Liri Valley.<sup>269</sup>

Only some few weeks later, on 5 June, Rome was joyfully liberated.<sup>270</sup> The Canadian Army's achievements in Italy were soon forgotten though. They were quickly overshadowed by D-Day in Normandy 6 June 1944.<sup>271</sup>

Canadian Forces continued the fight in Italy before they were finally withdrawn February and March to serve in North West Europe the winter of 1945.<sup>272</sup> But well before that, on the afternoon of 30 September 1944, Defence Minister James Layton Ralston visited the HQ of the Cape Breton Highlanders on the Italian Front. He was advised not to go, but Ralston had commanded the Highlander's predecessor, the 85<sup>th</sup> in the First World War.<sup>273</sup>

Ralston inquired about the state of affairs. He was given a stark first hand account of the Highlanders difficulties. Two weeks after Ralston's official visit, he decided on conscription and plunged Canada into the deepest political crisis of the war.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> David E. Graves (ed)., **More Fighting for Canada Five Battles, 1760-1944, "A Perfect Example of Teamwork:" The Battle for Melfa Crossing 24-25 May 1944**, Robin Brass Studio, Toronto, 2004, pg. 237-309.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid Madigan,2018

<sup>271</sup> Ibid Madigan,2018

<sup>272</sup> Wikipedia, Military history of Canada during World War II, 29 March 2019

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military\\_history\\_of\\_Canada\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_II#Italian\\_campaign](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_Canada_during_World_War_II#Italian_campaign)

Accessed: 10 April 2019

<sup>273</sup> A.R. Byers (ed) et al. **The Canadians at War 1939 -45 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.**, Reader's Digest Assoc., 1986, pg. 405

<sup>274</sup> Ibid A.R. Byers, 1986, pg. 405

Conscription was Mackenzie King's greatest fear. Nothing would materialize as long as the Army was in training, or if only a part of it was deployed as in Italy. Under such conditions, losses could be contained, and a crisis avoided.

But the whole army was engaged and fighting in Europe in 1944. King queried Montgomery shortly before D-Day and asked directly when the war would end in his opinion. Montgomery assured him, that it would all be said and done by November 1944.<sup>275</sup>

King hoped against hope that Montgomery's assessment was correct. It wasn't, and there came to pass a great need for manpower as the war progressed in the fall of '44. It grew progressively worse into the winter and spring of '45. The boys never did get home for Christmas. And the worst of it, the reinforcement system broke down, the replacement pool was exhausted, and the enlistment of volunteers at home was slowing.<sup>276</sup>

Four major infantry units had encamped in the Canso Defence Area from 1939-1944. These units became the fuel to filling the replacement pool overseas. They were:

- a. Pictou Highlanders 1939-1940,
- b. Halifax Rifles January 1941 – April 1942,
- c. The Irish Regiment of Canada - April 1942 to 7 September 1942, and
- d. Fusiliers du St Laurent 7 September 1942 -1944.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Pictou Highlanders went from Canso to active service in Newfoundland, 1 January 1941. It served there to August 1943 in a home defence role as part of Atlantic Command. One company of the Pictou Highlanders was later despatched to the Bahamas, September 1943 where they performed garrison duty until 28 March 1946.<sup>277</sup>

The Halifax Rifles were called out 26 August 1939 and placed on active service on 1 September for local protection duties. The unit was subsequently disbanded 31 December 1940 and mobilized as the '1st Battalion, The Halifax Rifles, CASF for active service, 1 January 1941. The unit was converted to armour, then

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid A.R. Byers, 1986, pg. 405

<sup>276</sup> Ibid A.R. Byers, 1986, pg. 405

<sup>277</sup> Canada, National Defence, The Nova Scotia Highlanders – Regimental History, A-DH-267-000/AF-003, pg. 2-2-166

redesignated: “23rd Army Tank Battalion (The Halifax Rifles)”. The unit overseas was disbanded on 1 November 1943 and used as replacements for losses in the field.<sup>278</sup>

The Irish Regiment of Canada too, was called out 26 August 1939 and placed on active service 1 September. The unit was designated 'The Irish Regiment of Canada (Machine Gun), CASF and placed on local protection duties. <sup>279</sup>

The Irish Regiment of Canada embarked for Great Britain on 28 October 1942. Notably the unit landed in Italy on 10 November 1943, as part of the 11th Infantry Brigade, 5th Canadian Armoured Division. Between 20 and 27 February 1945, the battalion moved with the 1st Canadian Corps to North West Europe, where it fought until the end of the war.<sup>280</sup>

Like its predecessors, Les Fusiliers du St. Laurent were called out 26 August 1939 and placed on active service, 1 September. They were designated 'Fusiliers du St. Laurent', and placed on local protection duties. The regiment was subsequently mobilized as the '1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Les Fusiliers du St. Laurent, CASF' for active service on 3 January 1942. It embarked for Great Britain 20 July 1944. Notably, the battalion was disbanded on 15 September 1944 to provide reinforcement and replacements for the Canadian Army in the field.<sup>281</sup>

All four units served Canada overseas, even in Newfoundland that was considered an overseas posting at the time. They served where they were needed most, and sometimes “most” meant their reorganization or disbandment to fill the gaping holes left by the “wastage” of war.

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<sup>278</sup> Canada, **THE HALIFAX RIFLES (RCAC)**, A-AD-267-000/AF-003, Pg. 2-3-27 to 2-3-28

<sup>279</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, Dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2), OP Orders, instr for 86 Coast Bty at Forts Beacon and Melford Jan 42/Feb 45, Pg. 44-46, and Pg.54-55 of 75

<sup>280</sup> Canada, **Irish Regiment of Canada**, A-DH-267-000/AF-003

<sup>281</sup> Canada, **LES FUSILIERS DU ST-LAURENT**, A-DH-267-000/AF-003

One of the gaping holes was the ever-widening gap of replacement for losses in the field. It would serve as the backdrop for decisions of higher headquarters in the events and decisions that passed in 1944.

The wastage and re-enforcement issue brought with it change, and the demise of Ralston as Minister of National Defence. It was in this swirling cauldron in which events unfolded in the Canso Defence Area that year.

Back in the Canso Defence Area, the early part of 1944 began with a major revision of its operational orders. The last review and amendments occurred in 1943.

All issued orders consistently apprised key military commanders of the foregone need for higher vigilance. But there are very few details indicating whether anything of significance warranted that readiness.

Enemy activity appeared to be quiet in the Strait of Canso Defence Area from 1939 to 1944. Their presence was not readily apparent, but they lurked in waters nearby. On Canada's part, the only incident of significance was a shot fired in "anger" over the bow of a small vessel by 86<sup>th</sup> Coastal Bty. The vessel's captain was unaware that he had wandered into and infringed upon restricted waters. If anything, this was a minor affair.

On the enemy's part, the only incident of major concern occurred 5 September 1942, and not in waters any where near Canso. It began with U-513 commanded by KrvKpt Rolf Rüggeberg. Rüggeberg torpedoed two iron ore ships, causing a loss of life, just off Bell Island, Conception Bay in Newfoundland. It was an incident of great daring, that was to be surpassed 2 November. U-518 then commanded by Friedrich-Wilhelm Wissmann returned to damage the docks of Scotia Landing at Bell Island by torpedo.<sup>282</sup> Notoriously, Bell Island was the only

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<sup>282</sup> U.boat.net, KrvKpt. [Rolf Rüggeberg](#), Patrol info for U-513, 5 Sep 1942; and Kapitänleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Wissmann Patrol info U-518, 2 November 1942

Source: <https://uboat.net/boats/patrols/details.php?boat=513&date=1942-09-05>

Accessed: 12 Apr 2019

community in North America to be directly attacked by a German U-boat during the Second World War.<sup>283</sup>

Notably, Wissmann in U-518 was on his first patrol and on a special mission, to land an agent in North America. On 2 November Wissmann entered Conception Bay. He proceeded to torpedo and sink 2 vessels; the *Rose Castle* and P.L.M. 27. He debarked Conception Bay, then on 9 November he successfully landed the agent at *Baie des Chaleurs* in Canada.<sup>284</sup>

There was real reason for vigilance in the Canso Defence Area. The Germans were unafraid of entering waters of similar scope. But maintaining a high state of constant readiness was difficult to sustain. Duty in the area became both a regular and mundane routine. That regularity and routine was about to be broken on 29 May 1944 though.<sup>285</sup>

Apparently, there was an incident of some concern that required unit action 9 May 1944. A telegram sent from 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty to GoC advised his superiors that a gun unit had been brought to action. The telegram was cryptic to say the least.

Beacon Bty's guns were brought to bear on some unknown target that day at 1800 hrs (6pm local). The telegram, a confirmation of an earlier telephone call, cryptically detailed the firing of the guns. Little was provided in the telegram as to what target was engaged or what precipitated or what necessitated this action.<sup>286</sup>

But prior administrative admonitions, concerning the unit's laxness on "urgent" reporting, ensured they reported the incident quickly. The battery promptly

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<sup>283</sup> Janie Robinson, **A chilling tale of Newfoundland and Nazis**, The Star, 6 Oct 2010

Source:

[https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/2010/10/06/a\\_chilling\\_tale\\_of\\_newfoundland\\_and\\_nazis.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/2010/10/06/a_chilling_tale_of_newfoundland_and_nazis.html)

Accessed: 12 Apr 2019

<sup>284</sup> U.boat.net, **KrvKpt. Rolf Rüggeberg, Patrol info for U-513, 5 Sep 1942; and Kapitänleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Wissmann Patrol info U-518, 2 November 1942**

Source: <https://uboat.net/boats/patrols/details.php?boat=513&date=1942-09-05>

Accessed: 12 Apr 2019

<sup>285</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 20 of 75

<sup>286</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45. Pg. 20 of 75

followed standard operating procedures, and the details of the action were promptly reported, phoned in, then followed up in writing. A hardcopy by telegram confirmed what had taken place. Given the placement of this battery, we can only assume that its fire had been directed out towards Georges Bay which was a confined area.

Had a U-boat wandered in and been targeted by the guns? Or was it another accidental incursion into restricted waters by an uninformed civilian vessel? It was a tantalizing account that was never specified or documented in the records, and as such, the incident remains unknown and inconclusive.

May 1944 proved to be a busy month. Immediately following the gun action of 9 May, 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty received a special notice from 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment RCA. 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Battery was notified of possible overflights of USN Blimps expected to traverse over its area. It was all very secretive.

Amazingly, the letter of 29 May 1944 survived in spite of an instruction that clearly stated the contents were to be memorized, then destroyed! All hands were to be informed of the passage, as well. 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment RCA was not sure when the blimps would pass through their area, but if they did, their presence was to be immediately reported. The letter of 29 May 1944 was supposed to have been burned and its contents, never to have been discussed.<sup>287</sup>

The overflight of blimps provides some insight into the threat in the area! Blimps were routinely used by the US Navy for convoy protection and in the anti-submarine role.

This form of aerial warfare was relatively unknown beyond the services as blimp crews fought in relative obscurity. The USN had 1400 airship pilots, gunners and mechanics who took part in an estimated 37,000 combat patrols. Along the way, they chalked up nearly 400,000 flying hours and successfully protected tens of thousands of friendly vessels from harm.

Goodyear produced more than 150 airships for the U.S. Navy between 1942 and 1945. The airships proved their worth in the ongoing sea battles around the globe. The mere presence of an airship over a convoy was often enough to keep

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 28-29 of 75

an enemy submarine at bay. They were feared because they were very effective in the attack and were armed with depth charges, guns and radar.<sup>288</sup>

Blimps like those serving in areas such as, the Canso Defence Area, were often underrated and soon forgotten. Performance of those duties were vital to the safety and protection of all allied mariners and trade that floated by our shores.

The Blimp telegram was soon followed by notice issued from HQ Atlantic Command, Halifax NS to all Military Districts and Force commanders on 10 June 1944. It was essentially an administration letter, sent shortly after 6 June, following the events of D-Day.<sup>289</sup>

Given the recent events in Europe, all were reminded of their command responsibilities as fortress commanders, and the command responsibilities concerning coastal defence. A high degree of readiness was expected by all! Indeed, their due diligence was extended to their training as well.

Emphasis was placed on the need for maintaining the currency of all orders, directions, and standards. It specified the needs for briefing and training of new personnel, who by this point, were rapidly rotated in and out of the Strait area in response to the higher needs of the army for replacements/reinforcements elsewhere.

Of special note concerned the maintenance of equipment. By this time in the war there was a surplus to requirement of equipment. Not all equipment was in demand in Canada, nor was it ever used. Yet special care was required in their maintenance for a future eventuality. The use of a surplus might be required at a later date.

Canada and its Allies were winning the war at least on the equipment and re-supply front. In the eventuality that existing equipment wore out or required replacement; field commanders were now free to replace them from existing unused stocks that they had on hand:

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<sup>288</sup> Editor, Military History Now, **The Other 'Silent Service' – U.S. Navy Airships of WW2**, 23 Oct 2013  
Accessed: 7 Nov 2016

Source: <http://militaryhistorynow.com/2013/10/23/the-other-silent-service-u-s-navy-airships-of-world-war-two/>

<sup>289</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 30-38 of 75

4. EQUIPMENT IN OPERATIONAL OR NON-OPERATIONAL STATE

C.A. equipment may in some areas be greater than the situation demands, in which case certain Btys (Forts) or portions of same may be regarded as non-operational and may be placed "in maintenance" or certain equipments be "not manned".

Instructions as to which Btys (Forts) are "in maintenance" or "not manned" are issued separately from time to time and such state is reflected in establishments.

In this connection, when a Fort is in maintenance, caretakers are provided on establishment and all main armament and equipment remain in situ available for manning under special arrangements should the situation deteriorate, whereas where equipment is "not manned" no manning details are supplied (except in the case of certain heavy power-driven armament where maintenance personnel are authorized), but such equipment is available for use to provide an immediate replacement in event of reduced approved armament being out of action for any reason.

But the most interesting aspect was the emphasis given to inter-service cooperation:

10. Liaison with the Other Services

The Joint Service Committee, Atlantic Command has accepted the principles outlined in the Manual of Coast Defence, Chapter 9, paras 32 and 33, as regards the duties of the Fortress Commanders, and this will form the medium of close and constant liaison between Commanders of the three Services in the respective Fortresses and Defended Ports.

The joint service community now accepted certain principles of cooperation with other services. These were applied by all fortress commanders for close and constant liaison. The "Manual of Coast Defence" (Chapter 9 paragraph 32 and 33) referred to the duties required in this matter. It was not clearly stated here but it is suspected that those duties included support to other services in the area for medical, administration, transport, and supply. No 5 Radar Unit, Cole Harbour NS was a case in point.

A further amendment to Operational Orders was soon issued 27 June 1944. It too contained minor adjustments and corrections, but once again, there was a need to restate the obvious in the Canso area. The person in command was the senior

infantry officer in charge of Mulgrave. It seems that even at this late stage of the war, that fact had to be continually reiterated.<sup>290</sup>

The issue of command relations was about to be rendered moot in any case. Observed in a routine "Situation Report" issued by OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty 1 July 1944, the unit said that there was no examination service that week for a variety of reasons.<sup>291</sup> Significant change followed.

A letter was received 15 August 1944. NDHQ Ottawa informed GOC in C (Atlantic), MD 6 and other senior commanders of a key decision. The operations at certain coast batteries would cease. This was their authority that operations of the identified units would cease forthwith. The decision effectively reduced the manning needs and requirements for several Coast Artillery Units.<sup>292</sup>

The identified coast artillery units were closed and placed in maintenance. The war was winding down on Canada's east coast, but it was ratcheting up in Europe, and replacement troops were required there!

Fortunately, Ottawa's instructions did not include the batteries at Beacon or Melford; presumably due to the vital and significant assets still to be protected there. But significantly, the battery at Halifax and one at Sydney were taken out of service in Nova Scotia. Another battery at St John NB, was placed in maintenance and removed from service by this order as well.

Halifax, Sydney and St John were serious ports that had to be defended from a very determined enemy. So, removal of these batteries indicated, that the tide of war had indeed changed in the Allies favour. It marked a clear turning point in the course of the war as well as a sense of growing optimism that we would win. It may well have been that the senior staff and government now looked toward the beginning of the end of the war.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 38 of 75

<sup>291</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 63 of 75

<sup>292</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 64-69 of 75

1. G.S. approval has been given for the undermentioned CA Btys. to be taken out of op role and placed into a state of maintenance:

<u>Station</u>	<u>Battery</u>	<u>Unit (RCA)</u>
Halifax, N.S.	Devils Bty	51 Coast Bty
Sydney, N.S.	Oxford Bty	36 Coast Bty
Saint John, N.B.	Mispec Bty	4 Coast Bty
" " "	Courtenay Bty.	" " "
" " "	Dufferin Bty.	(Part 15 Cst Bty)

The coastal battery withdrawals occurred well after D-Day, when the threat was greatly reduced. But the need for replacements may have also influenced the matter as well. D-Day had taken its toll and casualty replacements were required and imminent. In fact, it produced a conscription crisis here at home.<sup>293</sup>

The operation to reduce manning and the removal of equipment to maintenance status, was completed by 1 September 1944. The action that precipitated these changes was signed by (J.V. YOUNG) Major-General Master-General of the Ordnance. MGen Young issued specific instructions to each unit in the appendix to his letter above.<sup>294</sup> Routine acknowledgements were sent by OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty and others on 16 August.<sup>295</sup>

In the meantime, new threats were perceived, which now had to be considered, however unlikely. It may have been that the enemy realized that it was losing the war. Desperate measures and risks might be required to change the Allies strategic balance and direction. The government anticipated the enemy's possible intent and moves based on the current situation.

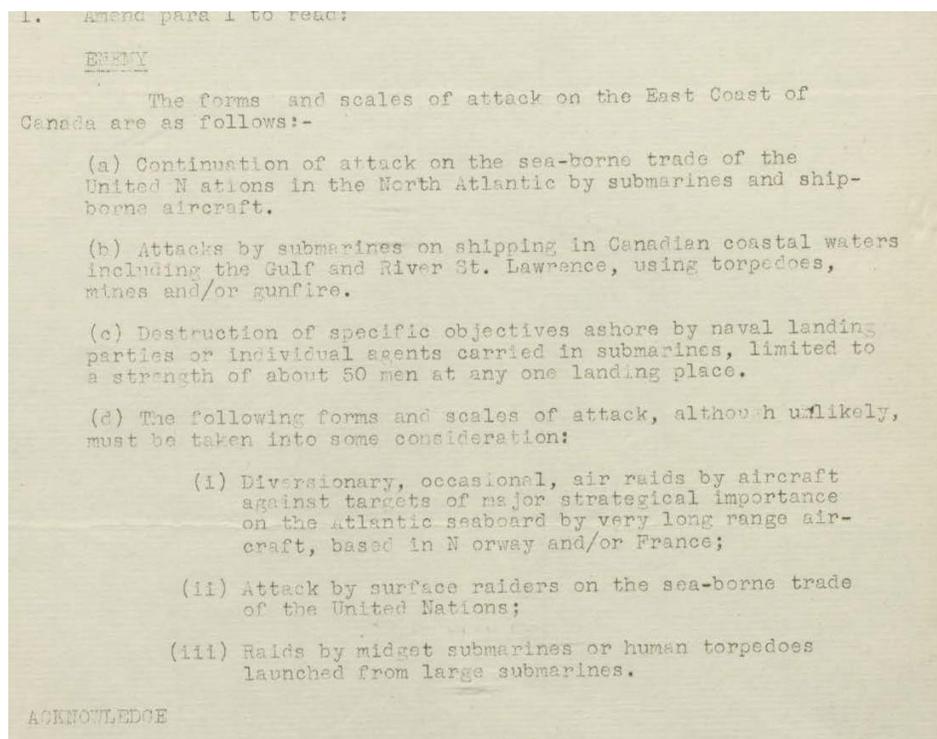
The hints of the enemy's possible intent and moves are found and are prevalent in intelligence summaries in the operation orders of 1944. They alluded to the enemy's potential employment of long-range aircraft either from Norway or France. Long Range aircraft lent to the possibility of the engagement of targets of

<sup>293</sup> Ibid A.R. Byers, 1986, pg. 405

<sup>294</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 69 of 75

<sup>295</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 39 of 75

strategic opportunity in Atlantic Canada. A warning found in orders was a heads up to that possibility and for various commanders to plan accordingly.<sup>296</sup>



The updated aerial threat required close liaison and cooperation amongst the services. No 5 Radar Unit and other units in the radar chain were the first line of defence in this eventuality. They provided early warning that was essential to engaging, repulsing and defeating this threat.

Close cooperation with the navy was also a primary necessity given the importance of the Strait and the need for cooperation therein. It wasn't so obvious for the air force's part in the beginning, but the looming aerial threat now made their need fully obvious.

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 40 of 75

The enemy did have long range aircraft at its disposal capable of a one-way mission. Long-range aircraft of roundtrip capability weren't available as yet. Their development had been hindered by the enemy's own service rivalries that greatly affected their development, deployment, and use.

A long-range strategic capability remained on the German drawing boards until the end of the war. There was a desire to develop a strike capability launched from and returned to German bases. That capacity simply did not exist. But a one-way, suicidal mission, certainly was a distinct possibility.

However, the greatest danger and threat came from the use of inter-continental ballistic missiles. There was no possibility of defence as the short-range missile attacks against England and Holland demonstrated.

Fortunately, all these weapons were mere pipe dreams and lay mostly unfulfilled on the drawing board.<sup>297</sup> They remained there, because of Germany's High Command choices, made early on, concerning investments and resources. German failures on the battlefield during the war certainly did not help either.

The good news was that the war in Europe was winding down too. There was growing confidence, if not certainty, that the war in Europe was about to be won. But nothing ever transpires as hoped or planned. There was still a long way to go.

Much could still happen in the uncertainty and fog of war. For the moment though, it seemed to those responsible, the tides of war had indeed changed in 1944. The end was in sight but not without pain and suffering that year.

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<sup>297</sup> Manfred Griehl, *Luftwaffe over America – The Secret Plans to Bomb the United States in World War II*, Greenhill Books, 2004, 256 pg.

## 17 – 1945 The End is in Sight

By January 1945, the end of the war was near in Europe, only some five short months away. But the military had anticipated that. Canada began winding down some of its operations at home beginning in 1944. It had an impact as the war drew to a close.

The change was often subtle, but the impacts were keenly felt at the unit level, particularly 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty. The OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty detailed some of his local problems to his superiors at 16 Regiment RCA, 7 February 1945. The unit was inadequately manned for its assigned tasks.<sup>298</sup>

Key to the OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty's defence and preparations were nearby searchlight batteries. Of note, there was insufficient personnel to run those searchlights. A reasonable manning level was required to maintain a high state of readiness. His problems also extended down to the manning of his own guns.

OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty was concerned that his overall readiness was severely impacted. He was no longer able to effectively execute his current mandate and orders. The OC requested either a reduction to his mandate or lower the state of readiness.

In the meantime, until some direction was received, OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty carried on as best he could, with what he had at hand. His plaintive plea mattered little. Beacon Battery was scheduled to close in any event.

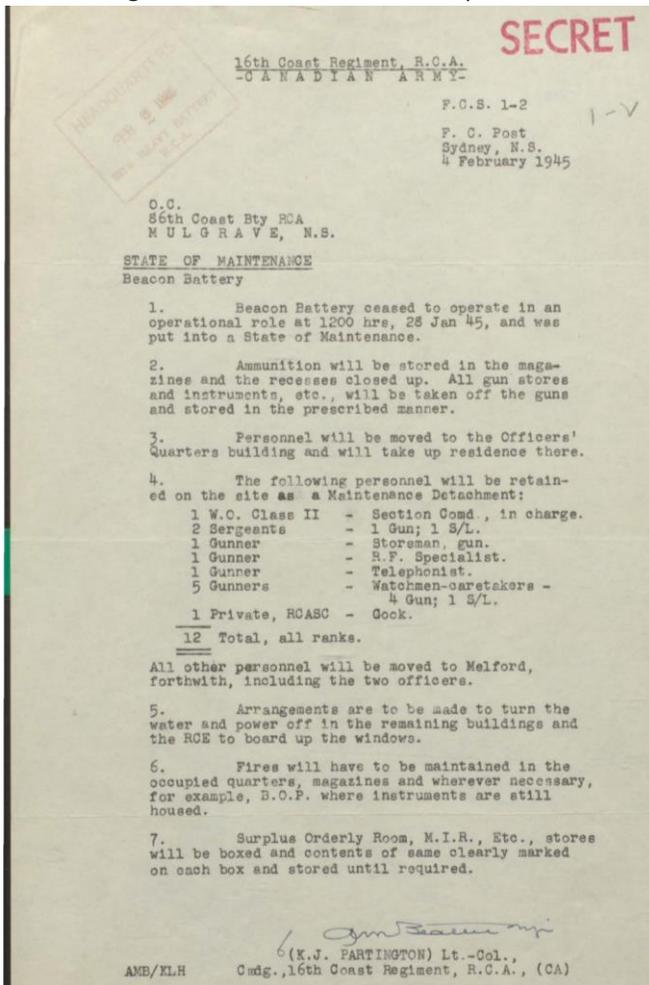
On 4 February 1945, OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty received a letter confirming that Beacon Battery would cease operations at 1200 hours, 28 January 1945. But it was now 7 February! It was obvious that little action was taken to cease operations, other than a reduced manning level, and the expectations of him and his unit remained in effect.

The Strait still had to be protected until the official notice of the closure of the batteries came. Until then, OC 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty was left hanging in the balance.

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 70-71 of 75

At this point of the war, the expectation was that resources were either to be released or placed into maintenance. For the 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty, maintenance meant that a minimum manning of 12 men were retained. It was done in the unlikely event the gun batteries had to be revived at short notice. But essentially the unit was no longer able to do the full task required of it.<sup>299</sup>



So, Beacon Bty was closed. The threat emanating from George's Bay on the Northumberland Strait side (Gulf of St Lawrence) was considered unlikely, and quite likely, it no longer existed. Melford Bty was retained for the time being, as the strategic threat from the Atlantic side was still a very real concern. Events transpired on the Atlantic side later that spring.

Still, a great sense of optimism hung in the air. That growing optimism for the end led many to believe that the war was already won, a done

<sup>299</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 41 of 75

deal if you will. The promise of a happy future loomed in the minds and hearts of all.

But the truth and fallacy of “growing optimism” became very apparent April 16, 1945. It was purported to have been a very nice, calm day. The RCN anticipated smooth sailing off Halifax Harbour. There was nothing to suggest that HMCS Esquimalt or any other ship would come to any harm. Yes, there were indeed warnings of U-boats in the area, but the war in Europe was so close to the end. Surely nothing would happen now. But the unexpected did happen.

HMCS Esquimalt was amongst the many classes of small ships built in Canadian Shipyards during the Second World War. Esquimalt was a Bangor Class Minesweeper. Canada built corvettes, motor torpedo boats, tenders and other vessels in addition to the minesweepers.<sup>300</sup>

The RCN and HMCS Esquimalt in particular faced a new U-boat threat in 1945. That threat was from a change of tactics that was very dangerous to Allied vessels. Some U-boats now had a new technical advantage; Schnorchel, which cloaked its operations.

Schnorchel, essentially an air pipe to the surface, allowed U-boats to operate stealthily while running sub-surfaced when charging the boat’s batteries. Schnorchel thus reduced a U-boat’s target profile to the area of the surfaced air pipe. A U-boat with this modification proved very hard and difficult to spot. It also proved to be a deadly threat to coastal batteries and fortifications.

Fitted with the Schnorchel underwater-breathing apparatus, U-190 lurking off Halifax, had a range of 13,850 miles while cruising at 10 knots. U-190 was equipped with a formidable array of 22 torpedoes, four loaded in the bow and two loaded in the stern tubes.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> A Royal Canadian Navy Historical Project, *For Posterity's Sake, Ship Index*, 2002-2016  
<http://forposterityssake.ca/RCN-SHIP-INDEX.htm>

Accessed: 10 Jan 2017

<sup>301</sup> Ibid U-boat.net

The Commander of U-190, Oblt. Hans-Erwin Reith took his boat up to periscope depth for a quick look around on 16 April 1945, just off the light ship at the entrance of Halifax Harbour. HMCS Esquimalt was seen off in the distance at a range of 1000-2000 meters, moving away from him.

Esquimalt was too close for his comfort. But when the Esquimalt suddenly reversed course, and rapidly made for U-190's position, Reith assumed that he was under attack. Reith launched an acoustic homing torpedo towards the approaching Esquimalt from his stern tube.

All hell summarily broke loose. U-190's torpedo ripped into Esquimalt's hull on its starboard side at approximately 0630 hrs. Water flooded in, the ship was settling and rapidly sinking. Esquimalt listed to starboard, then its emergency lights suddenly failed.

HMCS Esquimalt sunk so rapidly that lifeboats became trapped in their davits. Only four Carley floats were successfully deployed. The surviving crew plunged into the icy April waters with little clothing on them. The survivors made their way in frigid waters towards the safety of the Carley floats. It was their only hope of survival.<sup>302</sup>

Just because the war was winding down, didn't mean that the enemy was not active. The Esquimalt incident was proof of that. And the Type IX U-boat proved to be a formidable foe, well armed with large deck guns that could wreak considerable havoc. There was a certain wisdom to maintaining Melford Battery at full strength on the Atlantic Coast as the threat proved to come from that quarter.

A final operation order (Order 15) of the war was issued 4 April 1945 for Mulgrave and the Canso Defence Area.<sup>303</sup> There were no surprises or major changes to the instruction. Most of the fine detail pertained to the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps (RCASC) found in the appendix to this order.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid Fisher, 1997

<sup>303</sup> Ibid dead files 142.61B86009(D2) (B.B.S. 1-2) Op Orders Beacon Melford, Jan 42/Feb 45 Pg. 72-75 of 75

As the war wound down, the RCASC now oversaw holding and replenishing small arms ammunition for the area. Specifically, the RCASC was directed to hold locally, small arms ammunition, with a reserve to be held in Johnstown on the Bras D'or Lake, at a point between Canso and Sydney.

The end was indeed at hand! And the end happened very quickly. VE Day came 8 May 1945.

By July 1945, with the war in Europe finally over, the RCASC was ordered to move and dispose of equipment and ammunition in the Canso Defence Area and move from Melford to Debert.<sup>304</sup>

And as quick as that, the war in the Canso Defence Area was over and done with. The guns went silent, the search lights stood down, and the men dispersed and went home. By September, Japan surrendered. The war was finally over. Peace had come at last.

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<sup>304</sup> DHH Reports File 321 009 D125 Jul 1945 Vol 3, 3pg.<sup>304</sup>

## Epilogue

On 2 September 1945 with the official declaration of surrender by Japan, the Second World War finally came to its climatic end. Canada quickly took steps to demobilize its troops, close down infrastructure and attempted to return to a peacetime economy. It wasn't smooth and orderly. It took time to do so.

Those steps to return to a peacetime footing were taken very early in 1945. On 4 February 1945, the OC of 86<sup>th</sup> Coast Bty received a letter confirming that Beacon Battery would cease operations beginning at 1200 hours, 28 January 1945. The expectation was that the battery would simply fold and wither away. It didn't happen that way.

John Joseph Chisholm was a member of the BSM 86<sup>th</sup> Battery, RCA at Fort Melford Guysborough County. John was born 18 July 1915 at Springfield Antigonish County. He was married to Elsie MacKeen of Aspen, Guysborough Co. John died 1 May 1946 in a gas truck accident at Boylston in which the truck exploded and killed two people. He left Elsie a single mother with two young children, a boy Kevin, and a little girl, Brenda.<sup>305</sup>

Clearly then, there was a military presence in the Canso Strait Area and there would be for some time after the war. In fact, the need was always considered a possibility long after the war.

As late as 1967, at the height of the Cold War and after the Cuban Missile Crisis, there were plans to re-use the Canso Defence Area footprint in Mulgrave as a potential interment camp from hostile merchant shipping arrested in Canadian waters.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Robert Marks, Ed. MacIAIN CHIEFS, A Genealogy, MacKeans from England to Australia including United States and Canada, 2000 (Original 1990 Book Committee, Wilma MacKeen Powell, Aspen, N.S.; Clarence Archibald, Denver, N.S.; and John MacKean, ST Paul, Minn., U.S.A.) pg. 125

<sup>306</sup> Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History Archives, Operation Order - Internment Camp Mulgrave, NS File 3400-1 HQ Atlantic Region Halifax, NS, undated Nov 67 (declassified) 8pg (pg. 1 para 1)

The Canso Strait was tasked as an interment Camp. The area would not only hold the expected 200 to 5000 interred merchant seamen but also their ships for the duration of hostilities, should that have happened.

The military had an impact in other ways too. Their presence in the Strait of Canso opened the doors for future economic activity. The Strait was a choke point and barrier for Canadian commerce. As early as 1944 and perhaps earlier, consideration was given to the possibility of linking Cape Breton Island to the mainland by a causeway.

The building of the Canso Causeway was not meant to be during the war. But the thought of building one certainly provoked interest for the post war that hopefully would lead to full employment. In fact, the military appreciations, considerations and necessities eventually led to the firmament in government post war policy. That policy did see the building of the Trans-Canada highway, the Canso Causeway, and the marketing of coal in Cape Breton amongst many other projects all across Canada.<sup>307</sup> So Canadian wartime considerations provoked a grand vision of what was, and what actually came to be!

But that post-war boom came at a cost and a price that was bought and paid for by Canada's returning veterans. The price was not only paid on foreign battlefields but also here at home too, something that is largely unrecognized.

There were several fatalities due to military service in the Canso Strait Area over the course of the Second World War. At least three attributable to service in the Canso Defence Area, were recorded here. Two deaths were recorded at RCAF No 5 Radar Unit at Coles Harbour, Guysborough Co.; and many deaths were directly attributable to U-boat actions in and around the Strait Area that lay along the approaches to the Atlantic and Gulf of St Lawrence.

We must remember that the war was also fought on the home front. That service here in Canada, was just as important to the overall effort. It was a service that safeguarded the Homefront, that protected our commerce, and whose price was

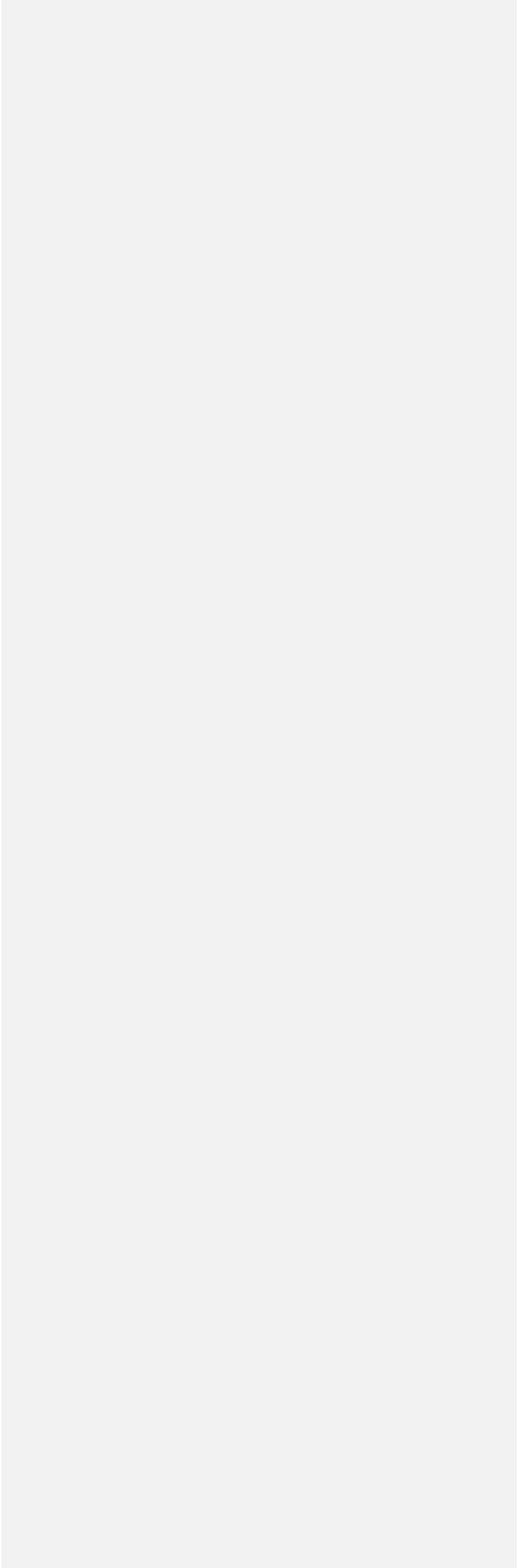
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<sup>307</sup> Anon., [REQUEST OTTAWA GIVE ASSURANCE TO ALL VETERANS](#), Hamilton Spectator, 1944/01/27

Source: <https://collections.museedelhistoire.ca/warclip/objects/common/webmedia.php?irn=5064000>

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also paid by our young Canadian men and women who did their duty here at home too.



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