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Just before midnight on 12 May, 1942, a torpedo fired by U-553 ended more than 180 years of peace on Canada's eastern waters. The six men that died as SS *Nicoya* sank in the St. Lawrence River were the first of 367 men, women and children to die in the only extended military campaign in North America during the Second World War.¹ Between 1942 and late 1944, sixteen German U-boats fired more than 50 torpedoes into the river and the gulf; some 30 struck home, sinking 24 ships. Three Royal Canadian Navy ships were sunk. HMCS *Raccoon* and HMCS *Shawinigan* lost all hands, 36 and 91 respectively. At least three torpedoes hit Canada, one making it up the beach at St. Yvon, Quebec.

The attack on *Nicoya* did not come as a surprise to Naval Service HQ. Shortly after the outbreak of the War in September 1939, the report of a U-boat in the St. Lawrence led to the immediate dispatch of a harbour vessel, complete with a sandbag-shielded machine gun and a "submarine diviner." By 1942, more intricate plans were developed. A convoy system was soon in place, alongside aerial surveillance flying out of Sydney, NS; Chatham, NB; and Mont Joli, QC. The

¹Technically speaking, the joint American/Canadian actions to re-take Attu and Kiska in the Aleutians occurred inside North America (as both are on the continental shelf). However, these islands are thousands of kilometres from the mainland. Similarly, while U-boats did enter the Chesapeake and land spies on Long Island, no ships were torpedoed inside American inland waters. Lastly, while the Japanese launched almost a thousand balloon bombs against North America, 300 of which reached the continent, one resulting in the death of six people in Oregon in May 1945, the balloon offensive cannot be considered a coordinated attack.

convoys were shepherded by armed corvettes (the workhorse of the North Atlantic Run), minesweepers and even converted yachts.

Korvettenkapitän Paul Hartwig: The Ace of the St. Lawrence



Paul Hartwig

On 27 August 1942, U-517, commanded by *Korvettenkapitän* Paul Hartwig, cruised through the Straits of Belle Isle. Before leaving Canadian waters in early October, his eels sank nine ships and killed 37 men. On 7 September, he destroyed two Greek ships, SS

Mount Pindus and SS *Mount Taygetus*, and the Canadian laker SS *Oakton*, in mere minutes. Four days later, Hartwig fired two torpedoes at the corvette HMCS *Charlottetown*, a few miles downriver from Cap Chat. Ray MacAuley, the helmsman who had just come on duty, recalls the next few moments:

"A tremendous explosion ran through the ship. We all felt it—felt it move with our bodies. But I could also feel the destruction of the stern through the helm. One moment we were steaming, the helm answering, and the next moment we shook and a tremendous roar washed over us from behind and the helm went dead and all power was lost. . . . It's hard to separate the two hits. For a split second, we could tell that the ship was shoved off her course and was pulling toward the stern as tons of water poured in. And then another blast, this one from our

right, and then everything began sliding toward the starboard, and we saw steam shooting up from the side of the ship."

Ten men, including Lieutenant John Willard Bonner, died.

The RCN Responds

These losses prompted the Canadian government to close the St. Lawrence to trans-oceanic shipping; coastal shipping had to continue because it was the only way to move supplies to many of the communities on the River and the gulf. The toll of September had been grievous. Despite primitive radar and sonar, and the bathyscape effect,² the retaliation of the RCN and Eastern Air Command were effective, though neither scored a "kill". After sinking *Oakton*, Hartwig's vessel was mauled by depth charges. On the 28th of September, he was forced to crash dive five times to avoid being spotted by planes belonging to Eastern Air Command. A day later, a bomb lodged in his boat's hull but failed to explode.³

By late October, U-boat commanders were comparing the St. Lawrence to the Bay of Biscay, over which the RAF had almost total air supremacy. *Grosseadmiral* Karl Dönitz said that Canadian "air power" forced him to pull his "grey wolves" out of the St. Lawrence.

² The bathyscape effect results from the mixing of cold fresh water from the rivers that empty into the St. Lawrence with the warmer salt waters of the river. The different types of water create layers that all but blinded asdic, as sonar was known at the time.

³ Hartwig was bombed to the surface on his next patrol. He was captured and spent the rest of the war at the POW camp in Kananaskis, Alberta. After the war, he rose to become Admiral of the West German fleet.

The Death of the SS *Caribou*

The greatest loss of life occurred on 14 October when torpedo 20235, fired from



Type VII Class U-Boat similar to U-69

U-69, struck the Newfoundland-Nova Scotia ferry *SS Caribou*. Within four minutes the 2,222-ton ship slipped under the waves.

Scores of men, women and children went down with her or were swept off decks. Dozens more died because their lifeboats capsized. In total, 136 men, women, children died that night.

Two Spies and a Weather Station

In 1942, U-boats successfully landed two spies, both of whom had lived in Canada before the War. The first, code-name "Langbein," set up shop in Ottawa, specifically at the Grand Hotel, a watering hole favoured by politicians, civil servants and military personnel. There is no record of Langbein sending information to Germany. Interestingly, by 1944 he ran out of money, and after turning himself into the RCMP, had trouble convincing them that he was a spy. The second infiltrator, Werner Janowski, was captured aboard a train from the Gaspé. The smell of diesel oil and his out-of-date currency were only two of the incongruities that convinced the owner of the rooming house where he boarded to tip off the RCMP.

In 1943, U-537 surfaced near Martin Bay in Labrador. The ten ratings who accompanied Dr. Kurt Sommermeyer and his assistant ashore were the only armed enemy force to land on the North American continent during the Second



Weather Station in LeBreton Gallery

World War. A few hours later, they paddled back to their boat, leaving behind a battery-operated weather station. In an effort to camouflage this transmitter, the words, "Canadian

Weather Service" (which did not exist), were stamped on the sides of the three heavy canisters. "Kurt" was functional -- but only for a few days. This weather station is now on display in the Le Breton Gallery of the Canadian War Museum.

The Final Tragedy

Dönitz sent his boats back to the St. Lawrence in 1944. On 14 October, U-1223 torpedoed HMCS *Magog*. The explosion killed three ratings and blew off the River Class frigate's stern. Her aft-bulk head held, however, and she was towed to Quebec City.



Flower Class Corvette similar to HMCS Shawinigan

Just over a month later, U-1228 torpedoed HMCS *Shawinigan*, which had been cruising off Cape Ray, NFLD, waiting to meet up the ferry SS *Burgeo*, in order to shepherd her

to Sydney. The explosion, which woke residents ten miles away in Grand Bay,

completely destroyed the corvette. No one survived to testify to what happened in the moments after the last Nazi torpedo exploded in the St. Lawrence.

For more information on the Battle of the St. Lawrence, consult:

Greenfield, Nathan: *The Battle of the St. Lawrence: The Second World War in Canada* (Harper/Collins, 2004)

Douglas, W. A. B., et. al: *The Creation of a National Airforce: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Airforce* (University of Toronto Press, 1986).

----- . *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943* (Vanwell, 2002).

----- . *A Blue Water Navy: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1943-1945* (Vanwell, 2007).

Hadley, Michael: *U-boats Against Canada: German Submarines in Canadian Waters* (McGill-Queens University Press, 1985)

Sarty, Roger: *Canada and the Battle of the Atlantic* (Art Global, 1998)

The website maintained by the Musée Naval du Québec (Quebec Naval Museum): www.mnq-nmq.org

Photographs courtesy of Ready Aye Ready Web Site, U-Boat.Net Web Site and the Canadian War Museum.

Ships Torpedoed in the Battle of the St. Lawrence, 1942-1944

<u>Date</u>	<u>Ship (Flag)</u>	<u>Deaths</u>	<u>U-boat</u>
11 May 1942	SS <i>Nicoya</i> (UK)	6	U-553
12 May 1942	SS <i>Leto</i> (Netherlands)	11	U-553
6 July 1942	SS <i>Anastassios Pateras</i> (Greek)	3	U-132
6 July 1942	SS <i>Hainaut</i> (Belgium)	1	U-132
6 July 1942	SS <i>Dinaric</i> (UK)	4	U-132
20 July 1942	SS <i>Frederika Lensen</i> ⁴ (UK)	4	U-132
27 August 1942	SS <i>Chatham</i> (US)	14	U-517
27 August 1942	USS <i>Laramie</i> (US) ⁵	5	U-165
28 August 1942	SS <i>Arlyn</i> (US)	12	U-517
3 September 1942	SS <i>Donald Stewart</i> (Canada)	3	U-517
6 September 1942	SS <i>Aeas</i> (Greek)	2	U-165
7 September 1942	HMCS <i>Raccoon</i> (Canada)	36	U-165
7 September 1942	SS <i>Mount Pindus</i> (Greece)	3	U-517
7 September 1942	SS <i>Mount Taygetus</i> (Greece)	5	U-517
7 September 1942	SS <i>Oakton</i> (Canada)	-	U-517
11 September 1942	HMCS <i>Charlottetown</i> (Canada)	10	U-517
15 September 1942	SS <i>Saturnus</i> (Netherlands)	-	U-517
15 September 1942	SS <i>Inger Elizabeth</i> (Norway)	4	U-517
16 September 1942	SS <i>Joannis</i> (Greek)	-	U-165
<u>Date</u>	<u>Ship (Flag)</u>	<u>Deaths</u>	<u>U-boat</u>
16 September 1942	SS <i>Essex Lance</i> (UK) ⁶	-	U-165
16 September 1942	SS <i>Pan York</i> (UK) ⁷	-	U-165
9 October 1942	SS <i>Carolus</i> (Finland)	11	U-69
11 October 1942	SS <i>Waterton</i> (UK)	-	U-106
14 October 1942	SS <i>Caribou</i> (Canada)	136	U-69
14 October 1944	HMCS <i>Magog</i> (Canada)	3	U-1223
3 November 1944	SS <i>Fort Thompson</i> (Canada)	-	U-1223
25 November 1944	HMCS <i>Shawinigan</i> (Canada)	91	U-1228

**For more information on German U-Boats during
WW II see
The U-Boat War 1939 - 1945
in Research Paper (Number 4) and
Fact Sheet (Number 26)**

⁴ *Fredericka Lensen's* Master, Bryan E. Russell, successfully beached his ship at Grand Valley, QC.

⁵ *Laramie*, a fleet oiler, miraculously survived the explosion and made it safely to port.

⁶ Torpedoed but not sunk.

⁷ Torpedoed but not sunk.