

S.S. NERISSA, THE FINAL CROSSING **by LCdr RCN (retired) William Dziadyk**

Reviewed by Allan Bacon

This book, by LCdr (Ret'd) William Dziadyk, is the story of the sinking of the *S.S. Nerissa*, the only troopship transporting Canadian Army troops to have been lost to enemy action during the Second World War. Details of the sinking remained classified for some fifty years after the event for reasons that are still unclear, and as a result it has largely been ignored in official and other histories of the war, as well as at remembrance events. Beyond the story of the sinking and its aftermath, however, the book contains a wealth of other well researched information.

The *S.S. Nerissa*, a 5,583 gross ton single stack passenger freighter was built in Glasgow in 1926 and up until the outbreak of war in 1939, and for seven months into the war, the ship plied its trade between St. John's Newfoundland, Halifax and New York, and latterly between New York and the Caribbean. In April 1940 the ship was pressed into wartime service for the transportation of troops and repainted grey. It was later fitted with guns and passenger accommodation increased to 250. It was not requisitioned under the Liner Requisition Scheme, but remained controlled and managed by its owners.

The author describes the types of trans-Atlantic convoys and, in an interesting section of the book, outlines the twelve crossings made by the *S.S. Nerissa* between June 1940 and April 1941. On five of the twelve crossings the ship sailed independently, its 17-knot maximum speed considered capable of outrunning a U-Boat. On several occasions when in convoy, the ship was the convoy commodore's command ship. During its third crossing, in the 51-ship convoy HX-65, the ship suffered some damage in the sea battle that resulted in 8 ships being sunk and 3 seriously damaged. On October 31st whilst in Liverpool, the ship suffered bomb damage. *Nerissa* was at sea in November 1940 when the German pocket battleship Admiral Scheer attacked another convoy. On other occasions the ship was damaged by extreme weather encountered in the North Atlantic. On its twelfth (westbound) crossing it had its luckiest escape when it was attacked twice in one day by a U-Boat, first a failed torpedo attack, and then shelled by a surfaced U-Boat. *Nerissa* managed to escape under a heavy smoke screen.

The heart of the book focuses on the events of the thirteenth and final crossing. *Nerissa* departed Halifax on April 21st 1941 and, after a brief stop in St. John's, sailed independently for Liverpool, entering the North Western Approaches to Britain, a "Happy Time" area for U-Boats, on April 29th. Captain Watson received an order to alter course to a more southerly route and then, without warning, at around 2230 hours *Nerissa* was struck by two torpedoes fired by U-552 under the command of Erich Topp, who was to end the war as the third most successful U-Boat commander. The vessel sank within five minutes amid chaotic scenes. Most of the crew responsible for launching the lifeboats had been killed by the explosion or drowned in the lower decks, and as a result inexperienced passengers struggled to get the boats away. Some had been damaged, falls jammed, and only two of the eight boats made it safely away from the

sinking ship, all others capsized. Even in the two that survived the drainage plugs were either missing or not properly fitted and men had to bail frantically in the frigid water to stay afloat. Survivor testimonies give harrowing accounts of men fighting for their lives.

A distress signal had been sent out, but unfortunately the ship's position was transmitted incorrectly. In addition, it appears that the Western Approaches naval staff did not appreciate the urgency of the situation and there was some delay in directing ships and aircraft to the scene. As a result, the *Nerissa* survivors drifted for some ten hours before being spotted from the air and then picked up by a British destroyer HMS *Veteran*. Only 84 survived of the 291 aboard *Nerissa*. Of the 105 Merchant Navy crew 81 perished, together with 73 of the 108 members of the Canadian Army.

In the aftermath of the sinking only two Official Inquiries were held, both by the Canadian Army. No naval inquiry was convened. Clearly the event was a combination of factors, all mentioned by the author. The alteration of course, the incorrect ship's position given in the distress signal, the delay in launching search and rescue operations, the lack of adequate protection given in the Western Approaches and the fact that *Nerissa* was sailing independently, all contributed to the disaster. It would appear also that the paths of *U-552* and *Nerissa* intercepted purely by chance. The governments of both Britain and Canada had to deal with a public relations dilemma, needing to inform next-of-kin but at the same time, for security reasons, keeping details from the press and the general public. The author deals with this issue in some detail, quoting from actual correspondence between government agencies and families.

Oddly, the book then proceeds to deal with the context of the British war efforts at the time of the sinking, an examination of the decoding by Bletchley Park of Enigma transmissions, the Home Fronts in Britain and Canada, and an extensive section dealing with U-Boat commander Erich Topp, before concluding with biographical details of many of the casualties and survivors, including information regarding where bodies washed ashore in Ireland and Scotland are buried.

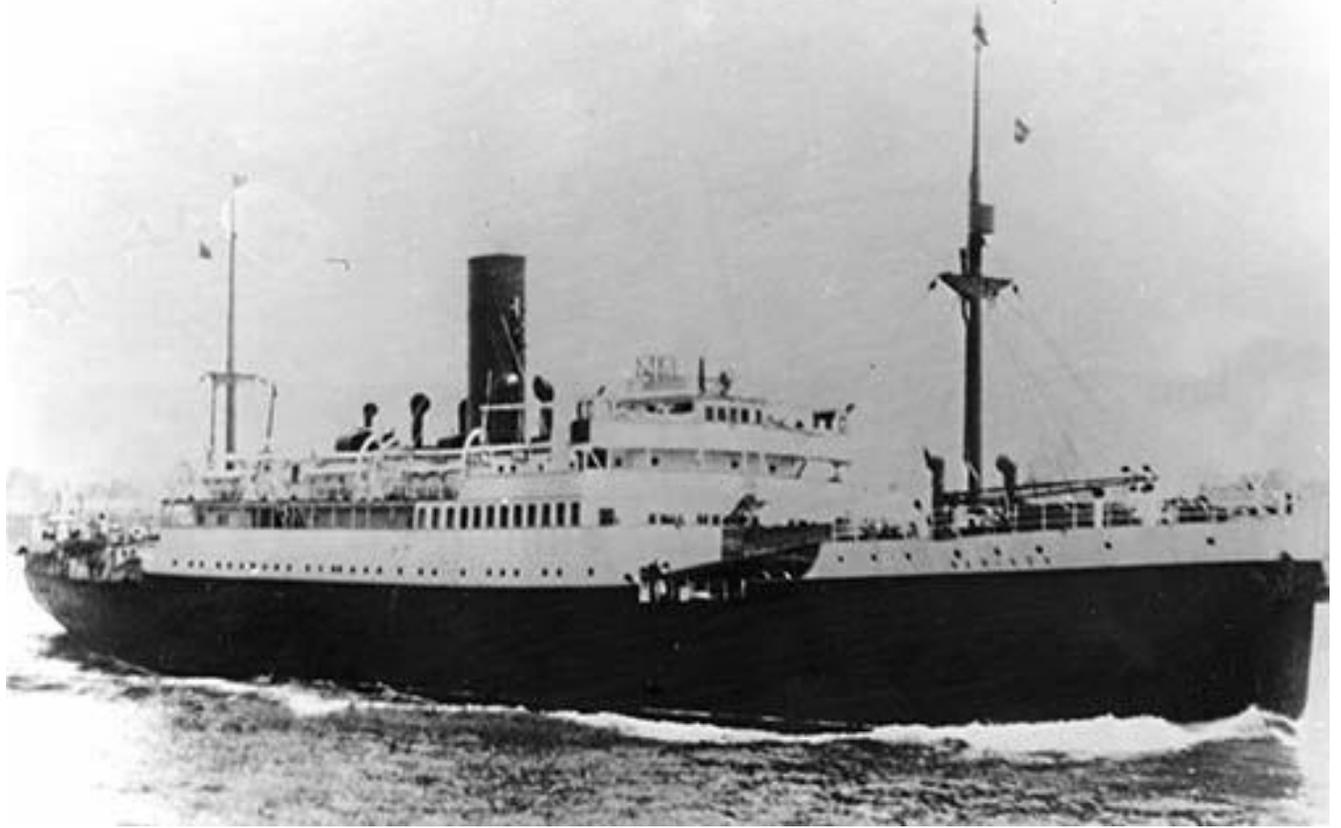
Overall the book is interesting, but it suffers from a number of weaknesses. The format and organization of the material inevitably leads to a good deal of repetition of information. This tends to detract from the story. Moreover the author on occasions gets sidetracked into giving too much information that does not add to the narrative and the relevance of which is questionable, for example, the extensive section dealing with Erich Topp, or the wartime history of the British destroyers that came to *Nerissa's* rescue, or the BCATP statistics. In and of themselves these are of interest and have been meticulously researched by the author, but perhaps would have been better placed in the book as appendices, where surely the section on Bletchley Park and Enigma belong. Also, although there are extensive endnotes after each section of the book, it would have been helpful to include a bibliography

In examining the question of relevancy, perhaps one example will illustrate the point. In the chapter headed "The U-Boat Commander" the author discusses Topp's role in the introduction

of the new type XXI U-Boats. These boats did not enter service until 1944. It would have been better, and more relevant, to deal earlier in the book with the type of U-Boat used in the attack on the *S.S. Nerissa*, which was a type VIIC and was capable of a maximum speed of 17 knots on the surface. This would have enabled a better consideration of the wisdom of allowing ships to proceed independently on the doubtful premise that they would be able to outrun a U-Boat. This might well have been true for a passenger liner used as a troopship, such as the *Queen Mary*, which had a cruising speed of 28.5 knots, but questionable in the case of the *Nerissa* with a maximum speed of 17 knots.

The author in his Prologue bemoans the fact that little is known about the fate of the *Nerissa*, and it has been overlooked in histories of the war and in remembrance events, and he is to be commended for his work in attempting to rectify this situation. However, there are references in the book to other wartime maritime disasters that help to explain this, where casualties were very much greater, for example the sinking of HMS *Hood* or the *Andora Star*. Comparisons could also have been made to other disasters where details were classified for many years and have “disappeared into national amnesia,” such as the sinking of the *Lancastria* in 1940 where 3,500-4,000 British soldiers and airmen lost their lives, or the torpedoing in January 1945 of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* carrying refugees, wounded German soldiers and naval personnel fleeing from vengeful Soviet armies. Of the more than 8,000 on board only 964 survived in the icy waters of the Baltic. It was said of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* that “she is the ship no one has heard of, as though she never existed at all.” A day later the same Soviet submarine torpedoed the *Goya* carrying refugees and a German Army unit. Of the estimated 7,000 on board only 183 were rescued. Certainly the loss of life among *Nerissa*’s passengers and crew was tragic, but it is not surprising that in the context of the war the event has been relegated to a footnote. Nor is it surprising, given that the Canadian government to its shame did not recognize until 1992 members of the Merchant Marine who served in the Second World War as eligible for veterans’ benefits. It took another six years until 1998 before the government agreed to compensate them for benefits owed them since 1945. It is to be hoped that in future histories the loss of the *S.S. Nerissa* will be acknowledged and Canadians will remember those who perished.

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Photograph of SS Nerissa, 1928-1939