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Paul Collins

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RESEARCH NOTES

Fortress Newfoundland: How the Fear of Nazi Attack Turned Newfoundland into an Armed Camp during World War II

PAUL COLLINS

ONE OF THE MORE popular local myths to come out of World War II was that the Germans planned to attack and possibly occupy parts of Newfoundland. This paper seeks to demonstrate, through published and archival evidence, that the threat of a German attack did have substance and was seen by the civilian and military authorities as being a real and imminent danger. The Dominion was strategically located at the crossroads to North America and would have offered the Nazis a target-rich environment had they actually struck. It boasted two naval bases, five military and civilian aerodromes, two seaplane bases, five army bases, and a variety of civilian assets important to the Allied war effort. Some anecdotal evidence even suggests that Hitler, at least briefly, considered an assault on Newfoundland as part of a larger campaign against the United States.¹ The Germans never did attack Newfoundland in a concerted manner, yet the mere possibility forced the Allies to turn the country into an island fortress.

When it entered the war as part of the British Empire, Newfoundland was totally defenceless. The country had always relied on the protection of the Royal Navy (RN) and again looked to Britain for security. The Admiralty, however, felt that the threat to Newfoundland was slight and, as during the Great War, promised to come to the rescue when and if danger actually materialized.² As a retired Royal Navy Vice Admiral, Newfoundland's Governor Sir Humphrey Walwyn probably recognized the hollowness of these assurances and, deeply concerned about the vulnerability of shipping in St. John's harbour, requested keeping the four-inch gun off the damaged SS *King Edward*, which was being repaired at the Newfoundland Dockyard.³ In any event, the Newfoundland Commission of Government could take its own measures, and these were immediately initiated. The British Overseas Defence Committee had formulated a *Newfoundland Defence Scheme* in 1936 that dictated steps to be taken at each stage up to and including the outbreak of war: The Peace Stage speaks for itself; the Precautionary Stage was defined as when relations with another power were so strained as to take precautions against hostilities; and the War Stage outlined planning for when war had actually broken out. The scheme set out when and how various warning telegrams would be sent and what actions should be taken upon receipt. Among the immediate measures to be implemented were the seizure of all ships belonging to the enemy, the detention of all British and neutral ships loaded with contraband believed to be destined for the enemy, and, finally, the prevention from clearing port of any British ships headed for an enemy destination.⁴ As St. John's and many of Newfoundland's ports were international in nature, these instructions had significant repercussions. Much of the iron ore mined at Wabana, Bell Island, and the lead and zinc mined at Buchans were shipped to Germany, and German vessels were constant visitors at Botwood, Lewisporte, and Corner Brook.⁵ Captain C.M.R. Schwerdt, RN, Walwyn's private secretary, was appointed Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC) and immediately established a Naval Control Service office and set about implementing the *Newfoundland Defence Scheme*.⁶ One of his first actions as NOIC was to order the seizure of the *Christoph von Doornun* at Botwood and the internment of her crew.⁷

At an emergency meeting of the Commission, Walwyn instituted committees to examine such serious issues as censorship, recruitment, currency, rationing, and of course, defence.⁸ Among the Governor's major concerns were the two airports. The Newfoundland Airport at Gander Lake and the transatlantic seaplane base at Botwood were developed during the 1930s for civilian purposes by the Newfoundland and British governments. Authorities feared that the Germans might try to neutralize both facilities as a strictly defensive measure or, even more worrisome, acquire them for their own use in hostilities against Canada and the United States. Should the Nazis get a foothold in Newfoundland, the whole east coast of Canada and the United States could be threatened.⁹ Indeed, Ottawa worried that if the Germans "were given six hours on a piece of land where they intended to establish an air base they could never be dislodged."¹⁰ The Dominions Office approved

Walwyn's request to form a Newfoundland Defence Force to protect the airports and dispatched training officers and a limited amount of equipment from Britain.¹¹ In the meantime, the Governor suggested that the Canadians be invited to take over the protection of both the Gander and Botwood facilities for the duration.¹² The British Air Ministry rejected this, as London was afraid that once they got in, the Canadians would be hard to dislodge, and these two airports would be very important to civil aviation after the war.¹³

Actually, Canada made the commitment to defend Newfoundland even before it entered the war against Germany.¹⁴ Not only did Ottawa consider Newfoundland to be an "essential Canadian interest" and an important part of the "Canadian orbit,"¹⁵ but Prime Minister Mackenzie King argued in September 1939 that by guaranteeing Newfoundland's safety, Canada would actually be assisting Britain's war effort by relieving it of that responsibility.¹⁶ In reality, Newfoundland presented a number of potential targets important to Canada besides the airport at Gander and the seaplane base at Botwood: the iron ore mines on Bell Island provided the ore for the steel mills in Cape Breton, which produced one-third of Canada's steel output; the numerous cable and wireless stations along the coast were critical for communications; and of course, the city of St. John's was the economic and political centre of Newfoundland.¹⁷ Indeed, Governor Walwyn lamented that it was "quite apparent that Newfoundland [was] being considered only in so far as the defence of Canada [was] concerned."¹⁸

During the "Phoney War" in Europe, the Canadian government did not act on its commitment to Newfoundland's defence.¹⁹ In fact, upon visiting Ottawa in March 1940 to discuss Canada's defence plans for Newfoundland, Commissioner for Justice and Defence L.E. Emerson learned that no preparations had been made. In meetings with the Chief of the General Staff, Major General T.V. Anderson, the head of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Rear Admiral Percy Nelles, and the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Chief, Air Vice Marshal G.M. Croil, Emerson discovered that no instructions had been issued relating to Newfoundland other than for the defence of Bell Island and those parts of the coast that were important to the defence of Canada. No provisions at all had been made to base anything in Newfoundland to protect the populous but very vulnerable coast stretching from Cape Freels at the head of Bonavista Bay to Cape Race at the southern tip of the Avalon Peninsula. During his March meetings, Emerson suggested at least basing reconnaissance seaplanes at Bay Bulls or Trepassey on the Southern Shore, or even somewhere in St. Mary's Bay or Placentia Bay. The Canadians regretted that "they did not have any planes to spare," but they did offer to train men to man the guns on Bell Island.²⁰

This state of affairs changed as the German blitzkrieg swept through France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1940. In June, Ottawa dispatched the 1st Battalion of the Black Watch of Canada to Botwood and stationed five Douglas Digby bombers from RCAF No. 10 Squadron at Gander.²¹ Nevertheless, it did not take long before the first invasion scare occurred. In early July, authorities received

intelligence that U-boats were going to set up an advance base at Cape Bauld at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula. Canadian troops were landed, aided by HMCS *Ottawa*, but no evidence of a German incursion was found and the troops were withdrawn.²² In the meantime, at a meeting held at the Colonial Building in St. John's, Major General Anderson and various government and local military officials discussed defensive measures in the event of an enemy attack. Lewisporte was seen as a likely insertion point for any enemy force intent on capturing the Newfoundland Airport. The Commissioner of Public Utilities, Sir Wilfrid Woods, informed the meeting that arrangements were being made, including an all-night telegraph watch, to immediately alert the airport should the enemy land at Lewisporte. Anderson recommended that Canadian troops draw up demolition plans for the Newfoundland Railway and also guard certain focal points along the line, in the event that an enemy force tried to seize one or more locomotives. Anderson was further concerned about the runway at Harbour Grace, which was long enough to accommodate enemy aircraft. Unwilling to make the site permanently unusable, he suggested temporary measures and Commissioner Woods recommended that large boulders be placed along the ground to temporarily block it.²³

Meanwhile, the sites for two 4.7-inch and two 10-inch guns had been selected at Signal Hill and Cape Spear, respectively, and a further two 6-inch guns were proposed on top of the 75-mm examination battery already in place at Fort Amherst.²⁴ Even so, Captain Schwerdt worried that an enemy cruiser or raider with 6-inch guns could easily silence the Fort Amherst battery, and systematically pound the harbour and town for at least an hour before planes from Gander, 135 miles distant, could arrive — assuming the weather co-operated.²⁵ His fears were somewhat alleviated with the news that four 155-mm mobile guns, four 3-inch anti-aircraft (AA) guns, and a number of smaller AA guns, as well as an ample supply of ammunition, were due at St. John's in January 1941 along with 1,000 American troops on the *Edmund B. Alexander* as part of the famous Anglo-American “destroyers for bases” deal.²⁶

In the summer of 1940, the British were dangerously short of destroyers for convoy escort duty. The Royal Navy lost a large number during the ill-fated Norwegian campaign and the evacuation at Dunkirk, with still more being sunk or damaged while held in port to counter the expected German invasion of Britain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill appealed to US President Franklin Roosevelt in May for “forty or fifty of [his] older destroyers” to fill the breach until new construction compensated for the losses.²⁷ Roosevelt was more than willing to do this, but the United States was officially neutral and such a transfer would contravene international law as well as inflame isolationist sentiment in the US. The answer seemed to be an exchange of sorts. As a gesture of friendship, Churchill proposed that Britain would allow the US to lease land on British territory in the western hemisphere for bases, and a reciprocal gesture would be made of the destroyers as well as other military hardware. Unfortunately, this remedy was too subtle for American policy-

makers, who preferred a more direct and documented swap. On the other hand, a straight exchange of assets would not have gone down well in the territories involved or in Britain. British Minister of Supply Lord Beaverbrook opined that if the British were going to make a bargain, he did not want to make a bad one, and in his opinion, granting British territory to the Americans for 99 years in exchange for 50 overage destroyers was a bad deal.²⁸

The solution came in a compromise that gave the British their gesture and the Americans their business deal. Leases would be given “freely and without consideration” to the Americans in Newfoundland and Bermuda, while similar facilities would be traded in Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guiana, St. Lucia, and Antigua for the 50 destroyers. This solved the problem, and the “destroyers for bases” deal, as it became known, was announced on 3 September 1940.²⁹ Ultimately, the United States developed facilities at St. John’s (Fort Pepperrell/Camp Alexander), Torbay, Argentia (Argentia Naval/Air Station/Fort McAndrew), Gander, Stephenville (Harmon Air Force Base/Camp Morris), and eventually Goose Bay, Labrador. By war’s end, tens of thousands of American servicemen had been stationed in Newfoundland and Labrador, and hundreds of thousands of US military personnel and passengers had passed through the various US facilities throughout the country.³⁰ Despite the troops and equipment landed on the *Alexander*, Roosevelt still had concerns about North America’s most important outpost and proposed to Churchill that the US send an additional half battery of 8-inch guns, one squadron of three medium and three heavy bombers, and 57 officers and 575 men to bolster Newfoundland’s defences.³¹

The Canadians were justifiably concerned about this tremendous buildup of American forces in what they rightly considered their own front yard. Ottawa viewed Newfoundland as the “key to the gulf of Canada” and “in many ways [its] first line of defence.”³² Nevertheless, the Anglo-American Staff Agreement, signed without Canadian participation in early 1941, assigned the United States strategic control over the Western Atlantic. The Canadian government feared that this agreement was an attempt to oust Canada from Newfoundland³³ and worried about a permanent American presence in the Dominion.³⁴ It was clear that Canada needed to impress upon its allies the “vital nature” of its interest in Newfoundland.³⁵ As Malcolm MacLeod noted, “Canada was determined to become a weighty presence in Newfoundland, both for the sake of winning the war and for future considerations.”³⁶

Consequently, by the fall of 1940, Canadian contractors were building Camp Lester on the outskirts of the city and the newly appointed Commander, Combined Newfoundland and Canadian Military Forces, Brigadier P. Earnshaw, arrived at St. John’s in November. By the end of the year, 775 men from the Canadian 53rd Infantry Battalion had arrived to defend St. John’s.³⁷ The Royal Canadian Navy had also appeared in Newfoundland shortly after the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement announcement (actually signed 17 March 1941) and set up a Naval Ex-

amination Service to control shipping entering St. John's harbour and provide further defence for the facilities. Naval Service Headquarters assigned HMCS *Amber* for duty as an examination vessel and NOIC Schwerdt set up a Port War Signal Station in Cabot Tower on Signal Hill.³⁸ By the following June, the Canadians had turned St. John's into a well-defended harbour and home base for the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF), which protected the vital transatlantic convoys to Britain,³⁹ plus the Newfoundland Defence Force (NDF) comprising five corvettes, two minesweepers, and four Fairmile patrol boats. In addition, Captain Schwerdt and his staff arranged to install an anti-torpedo baffle in The Narrows, and enlarged the Examination Service by enlisting two former Newfoundland Customs cutters, *Marvita* and *Shulamite*, complete with their crews. A 4,000-ton Admiralty fuel tank was under construction on the south side of the harbour, and a Port War Signal Station was planned for Cape Spear in addition to a High Frequency Direction Finding (HF/DF, or Huff Duff) station and a radio beacon. One RCN leading signalman and five ratings manned the Cabot Tower Port War Signal Station, and Fort Amherst was fortified as an Examination Battery including four RCN signalmen.⁴⁰ The Canadian Army completed this battery in the fall of 1941; in the interim, American troops manned four mobile 155-millimetre guns and two 8-inch railway guns in and around St. John's for defence.⁴¹ In addition, a continuous listening watch at several Department of Posts and Telegraph wireless stations outside St. John's was in contact with approximately 100 low-power wireless stations throughout the coastal regions of Newfoundland. Observers were instructed to report any and all aircraft — especially at night — as well as any unidentified ships, gear, or wreckage.⁴² This led to a mine being reported by a Newfoundland Ranger in La Scie on the Baie Verte Peninsula in mid-August 1941. It had been picked up off Horse Islands by a local resident and towed ashore. Apparently the finder had hoisted it onto the pier and with the help of several local men then rolled it a considerable distance to his storehouse. The ranger suggested that it was miraculous that "all the people living in the little cove ... were not blown to pieces."⁴³

Meanwhile, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) started construction on an air base near the community of Torbay just outside St. John's. Aircraft stationed there would provide protection for St. John's and Bell Island, as well as patrol the convoy routes east of Newfoundland. Group Headquarters was established at St. John's under the command of Group Captain C.M. McEwen during the summer of 1941, and RCAF Station *Torbay* opened in October with two runways. Patrols commenced when four Hudson bombers from No. 2 (British) Squadron arrived from Nova Scotia the following month.⁴⁴ In February 1942, due to the dramatic increase in passenger traffic between Canada and Newfoundland, Canada initiated a regular Trans-Canada Airlines service between the two dominions.⁴⁵

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the subsequent German declaration of war, the Americans became full participants in the worldwide conflict. Their facilities throughout Newfoundland were an integral part

of western hemispheric defence, and local military authorities seriously addressed the issue of Newfoundland's vulnerability to attack. The commander of American forces in Newfoundland, Major General G.C. Brant, felt that an assault on Newfoundland was not only possible "but very probable." Smarting from the Pearl Harbor attack, he worried that aircraft catapulted from merchant ships would spearhead any strike.⁴⁶ Indeed, the Kriegsmarine had four aircraft catapult ships, which naval authorities felt would be the most likely vehicles for any assault on Newfoundland, particularly St. John's. They had the range and endurance, and two could carry multiple aircraft. The others carried at least one aircraft and all could be used as mother ships for a larger force.⁴⁷ With this in mind, the Allied service heads in Newfoundland met with select members of the Newfoundland government at Commissioner Emerson's office in the Colonial Building to discuss defence arrangements for St. John's. They agreed that an attack would come from the sea and most likely take the form of an air assault.⁴⁸ Consequently, a comprehensive blackout regime was discussed. Emerson proposed a two-week continuous blackout commencing at the end of January, with the regulations covering all of St. John's and surrounding area, including Conception Bay. The committee decided that air raid shelters were impractical since an effective shelter needed to be at least 30 feet underground to protect against high-explosive bombs, and St. John's, for the most part, sits on solid rock. Further, as an air assault would be sea-launched and thus be limited in size, a sustained attack was not anticipated and would probably be over before people could get to shelters. Thus, the committee felt that the main cause of casualties would be falling debris and splinters. Experience in Britain showed that the best defence against this was for people to stay in their homes, under stairs, or in cupboards or pantries, and to tape or board up windows.⁴⁹ In any event, the committee thought that attacking forces would probably use incendiaries rather than high-explosive bombs, so fire actually posed the biggest danger.⁵⁰

A strike against St. John's would concentrate on shipping and the docks, but any attack, especially with incendiaries, would pose a serious fire hazard to the whole area. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Outerbridge was appointed Director of Civil Defence and immediately sought to co-ordinate his air raid measures with the various fighting services, and liaison officers from each service were appointed to his staff.⁵¹ At the ready were the local Auxiliary Fire Service, the RCAF fire unit at Torbay, and the US Army fire unit at Fort Pepperell, the American base on Quidi Vidi Lake. In addition, authorities encouraged home and business owners to take their own fire precautions, including distributing sandbags and 2,300 stirrup pumps. Fire wardens were also organized and could be called out in the event of attack. In the event of need, the Americans offered Camp Alexander on Carpasian Road as emergency accommodation for up to 2,000 people, plus their facilities at the Torbay airport and the Argentia Naval/Air Station, as well as mobile kitchens to feed fire fighters and those forced to evacuate their homes. Homeowners would be asked to stockpile several days' essential supplies for an emergency.⁵²

As if to add immediacy to the threat, on 28 January a US shore battery at Logy Bay reported a large ship about five miles offshore launching an aircraft. Admiral Leonard Murray, RCN, the Flag Officer, Newfoundland Force (FONF), immediately sent HMCS *Dauphin* to investigate but the ship returned having found nothing suspicious.⁵³ Nevertheless, authorities were nervous and they became even more so on the evening of 3 March when three large explosions shook the Southside Hills. It took a couple of days before the cause could be confirmed, but Admiral Murray suspected it was a U-boat attack.⁵⁴ In early February, the Americans had detected “definite sound contacts” in Placentia Bay, not far from their base at Argentina,⁵⁵ and on 1 March a US patrol plane sighted and sank a U-boat 25 miles south of Trepassey, the first American U-boat kill of the war.⁵⁶ Torpedo fragments were eventually recovered from the rocks below Fort Amherst a few days later, which proved that torpedoes had been fired at St. John’s harbour, probably from long range.⁵⁷ However, authorities puzzled as to why a U-boat commander would waste valuable torpedoes firing at (and missing) the entrance of an obviously defended port.⁵⁸ The mouth of St. John’s harbour is called “The Narrows” for a reason, so perhaps Kapitänleutnant Ulrich Borchardt in *U-587* was attempting to seal it or possibly test the harbour defences, but his motives will never be known as the U-boat was lost with all hands a few weeks later (27 March).⁵⁹ Possibly prompted by this attack, the Newfoundland government requested a meeting with Allied service heads to discuss denial plans should the Germans mount some sort of landing at St. John’s. At this meeting, Commissioner Emerson distributed “Instructions Issued To Certain Colonial Dependencies on ‘Scorched Earth Policy,’” based on British Scorched Earth Plans formulated in the summer of 1940.⁶⁰

As his forces and facilities constituted major targets in St. John’s harbour, Admiral Murray ordered his staff, under the chair of Captain (D) E.R. Mainguy, RCN, to draft a proposal for the destruction of the RCN facilities. By September, Captain Mainguy, now acting as interim FONF, issued copies of “Denial Plans — Naval Installations, Equipment and Supplies” to the other service heads. The RCN plans were comprehensive and fraught with danger. Fire was to be the main means of destruction. The RCN buildings in St. John’s would be burned. The Newfoundland and Naval dockyards would be demolished using depth charges, naval vehicles would be driven off wharves, and the harbour entrance sealed with block ships. The authors expressed their concerns as to how best to destroy the naval ordnance facilities and the Admiralty and Imperial Oil fuel tanks on the south side of the harbour. The easiest and most effective means of destroying the fuel stocks was simply to open or smash the valves and ignite the leaking fuel. However, the authors cautioned that if this were done, it could “result in a fire, the extent of which cannot be gauged.” Even if the fuel was not ignited and was simply contained behind the concrete retaining walls surrounding the tanks, the authors cautioned that the fire hazard would still be great.⁶¹ Schwerdt, now Captain of the Port of St. John’s, felt that preventing an enemy landing in the first place and deterring sabotage by fifth col-

umnists were more important than a “scorched earth policy.” Nevertheless, these plans remained in force until a month after D-Day (6 June 1944) when “the improved strategic situation” prompted the Chiefs of Staff Committee in Ottawa to cancel the scorched earth policy for both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.⁶²

Perhaps at Schwerdt’s urging, a full-scale air raid drill was carried out in St. John’s during May 1942, involving both the fighting services and the civil defence authorities. It revealed a number of serious deficiencies in both equipment and organization. The drill showed clearly that there was an acute lack of fire-fighting equipment, first aid stations, and gas masks and decontamination units for the civilian population.⁶³ Even before these deficiencies could be cured, St. John’s experienced an air raid scare. In early June, the mayor of St. John’s, Albert Carnell, phoned Commissioner for Defence Emerson from Montreal with supposedly reliable information that a number of enemy aircraft would attack St. John’s on 10 June. A “yellow” alert was issued, and all air raid measures were instigated for the nights of both 9 and 10 June, although only the fighting services stayed on high alert on the 10th.⁶⁴ No raid occurred, but if anybody thought that the threat was fallacious, this impression was dispelled by three U-boat attacks close to home in the fall.

On the night of 4 September *U-513*, under the command of Kapitänleutnant Rolf Ruggeberg, followed the ore carrier *Evelyn B* into the Wabana anchorage in Conception Bay. Spending the night submerged, Ruggeberg rose to periscope depth the next morning and sank two ships, *SS Saganaga* and *SS Lord Strathcona*. Slightly damaged by a collision with *Strathcona*, *U-513* left the scene, once again trailing *Evelyn B*. Twenty-nine men were killed in the attack, all aboard *Saganaga*.⁶⁵ Nothing appeared in the press about this incident, no doubt the result of the strict censorship regime in place, but news quickly spread.⁶⁶ The public was shaken because the attack had occurred in broad daylight, in an inshore protected anchorage. Captain Mainguy complained that while the public accepted losses in convoys as the “fortunes of war,” it blamed sinkings so close to St. John’s on “dereliction of duty on the part of the Navy.”⁶⁷

To possibly assuage public fears, the RCN, RCAF, Canadian Army, United States Army, and US Army Air Corps, plus the local Air Raid Precautions (ARP) organization, conducted combined manoeuvres later in the month. The exercise took the form of a mock landing some distance outside St. John’s and thoroughly tested the defence preparedness of the local command. Overall, the exercise was a success and afforded the opportunity to improve defence arrangements still further.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, whatever goodwill this exercise created was negated the following month by the sinking of the Sydney-Port-aux-Basque ferry, *SS Caribou*.

Caribou left Sydney for its last trip at approximately 9:30 p.m. on 13 October escorted by the Bangor minesweeper HMCS *Grandmere*. Early the following morning, *U-69* under the command of Kapitänleutnant Ulrich Gräf spotted *Caribou* and misidentified both the 2,222-ton *Caribou* and 600-ton *Grandmere* as a 6,500-ton

passenger freighter and a “two-stack destroyer.” Shortly thereafter, he hit *Caribou* on her starboard side with a lone torpedo and the ship quickly sank, leaving many swimming for their lives in the freezing waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. *Grandmere* attacked the U-boat, dropping several patterns of depth charges over the next couple of hours, but having achieved no results gave up the hunt and began to pick up survivors. By this time, of the 237 people aboard, only 103 were found alive and two died shortly thereafter.⁶⁹ Of the 46-man crew, mostly Newfoundlanders from the Channel/Port-aux-Basques area, only 15 remained. Five families were decimated: the Tappers (five dead), Toppers (four), Allens (three), Skinners (three), and Tavernors (the captain and his two sons). The St. John’s *Evening Telegram* reported that the disaster left 21 widows and 51 orphans in the Channel/Port-aux-Basques area of Newfoundland.⁷⁰ So shaken were the residents of the area, they petitioned the government to strengthen fortifications and institute a blackout. After an investigation, authorities felt that defences were adequate — Harmon Air Force Base in Stephenville was only a short flight away — and a blackout would cause more difficulties for the residents than was warranted by what they considered a minimal threat of attack.⁷¹ As if to undermine this assessment, the ore carriers at Bell Island were once again targeted by a German U-boat.

At approximately 3 a.m. on 2 November, *U-518*, under the command of Kapitänleutnant Friedrich Wissmann, entered the sheltered Wabana anchorage and found several anchored ore carriers silhouetted in the beam of a searchlight. Shortly thereafter, he fired one torpedo at the 3,000-ton *Anna T*, which missed and exploded ashore at the loading dock. With the anchorage now fully alerted, Wissmann quickly sank SS *Rose Castle*, taking 28 of her crew with her, five of whom were Newfoundlanders, and the Free French vessel *PLM 27* with the loss of 12 men. In the ensuing confusion, and despite the presence of a corvette and two Fairmile patrol boats, *U-518* escaped on the surface in the darkness. In a 10-minute attack, two ships, along with 40 men, had been lost.⁷²

Admiral Walwyn was outraged at the sinkings. He had been on a hillside overlooking the anchorage the previous day, and was horrified to see two ore ships at anchor awaiting a loading berth. Walwyn told naval authorities that he thought it was “madness” to let the ships loiter unprotected at the anchorage. The Governor felt it was wiser to leave them in St. John’s until a berth was vacant and incorrectly suspected that the same perpetrator of the September attack was probably responsible this time.⁷³ The Dominions Office was equally critical of local naval authorities, concluding that the incident “reflect[ed] little credit on those in charge.”⁷⁴ In fairness, the newly appointed FONF, Commodore H.E. Reid, did the best he could with what he had, and despite the strain on his resources, Reid had maintained the regular schedule of Wabana/Sydney convoys instituted after the September sinkings, a total of 16 being run each way during October. In the end, net protection was installed off the loading piers and provisions were made to allow only two ships to load at a time while being protected by escort vessels.⁷⁵

While the feared German invasion had not occurred, it still seemed to many officials and local residents that Newfoundland was at the front lines of the Battle of the Atlantic. In the space of nine months, St. John's had been attacked with torpedoes and faced an air raid scare, four ore carriers had been sunk at Bell Island, and Newfoundland's vital link with mainland Canada had been sent to the bottom of the Gulf with tremendous loss of life. In Gander, Stephenville, Lewisporte, Botwood, Argentia, Bell Island, and countless outposts across the island and in Labrador, armed servicemen guarded military and civilian facilities. The city of St. John's and its environs bristled with heavy artillery and anti-aircraft guns, boom defences and anti-torpedo nets protected the harbour filled with Canadian, British, and American warships, and American and Canadian aircraft patrolled overhead. History shows that the Battle of the Atlantic, and indeed the war in general, was approaching a climax during this period and no one quite knew which way it would go. Still reeling from the fall disasters, the tense population of St. John's were soon reminded that the enemy also walked among them.

On 12 December, a fire broke out in the attic of the Knights of Columbus hostel in St. John's. The building had been built to provide a recreation facility for military and merchant marine personnel, and dances, concerts, and other entertainments were held frequently. All were well attended, and the event held that cold December night was no exception. *Uncle Tom's Barn Dance* played to a packed audience, and the show was broadcast over radio station VOCM. Suddenly there was a cry of "Fire!" and the broadcast ended. Within 45 minutes, almost 200 people were dead or injured.⁷⁶ The inquiry into the fire, headed by retired Chief Justice Sir Brian Dunfield, concluded that it was the work of an arsonist, but could not determine if enemy agents were involved.⁷⁷ Regardless, suspicion of enemy action persisted, and not without some justification. There had been other fires in buildings frequented by military personnel during the same period. The Old Colony Club had burned with the loss of four lives, and fires had been set at the USO Club on Merry-meeting Road and the Red Triangle hostel on Water Street. Much was made of the fact that someone had torched the Knights of Columbus hostel in Halifax shortly before. Indeed, Governor Walwyn reported to the Dominions Office that major fires always seemed to occur on the weekends, when the buildings were full of military personnel.⁷⁸

By the summer of 1943 the pendulum of war had swung in the Allies' favour, and by D-Day the following June any serious threat to Newfoundland had all but disappeared. Even though the Germans never did launch a concerted assault against Newfoundland, the fear of such had hung over the country for much of the war. To counter it, the Allies invested hundreds of aircraft, thousands of tons of equipment, tens of thousands of servicemen, and many millions of dollars to protect this strategically important piece of real estate. Certainly one could suggest that part of this buildup was due to the competition between the Canadian and American governments for dominance in Newfoundland, but the Nazis probably also benefited, es-

pecially in 1942, as much from the mere possibility of attack on Newfoundland as from any actual incursion. Without this perceived danger, the men and *matériel* used to counter it could have been brought to bear elsewhere, from the Western Pacific, to North Africa, to the Mediterranean — all areas where American and Commonwealth forces struggled to contain Axis advances. That they were not indicates just how seriously the Allies viewed both the threat to Newfoundland and its importance to the war effort.

Notes

¹“Says Newfoundland Was Included in Hitler’s Plans,” *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s), 13 July 1944.

²Great Britain, National Archives (TNA/PRO), Admiralty (ADM) 1/10608, Admiralty minute, Director of Plans, 15 Mar. 1940. See also TNA/PRO, ADM 1/10608, Admiralty to Dreyer, 2 May 1940.

³London denied the request. Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), GN38, File 2: J23-40, Memorandum for Commission, 23 May 1940. See also Governor to Dominions Secretary, 25 May 1940, in Paul Bridle, ed., *Documents on Relations between Canada and Newfoundland*, 2 vols. (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1974-84), I, 76; Dominions Secretary to Governor, 10 June 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 80.

⁴PANL, GN38, Dept. of Justice and Defence, S4-2-1.2, File 14, Newfoundland Defence Scheme 1936.

⁵Gerhard Bassler, *Vikings to U-Boats: The German Experience in Newfoundland and Labrador* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 194-96, 225-27.

⁶PANL, DO 35/725, B5012, Governor’s quarterly report for the period ending 30 Sept. 1939.

⁷Bassler, *Vikings to U-Boats*, 194-96, 225-27.

⁸“Newfoundland Emergency Defence Measures,” *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s), 2 Sept. 1939.

⁹Air Officer Commanding, Eastern Air Command, to Secretary, Department of National Defence, 29 May 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 77-78.

¹⁰This assessment was based on Allied experience in Norway. PANL, GN38, S4-2-4, File 2, A.S. Brand, Director of Naval Intelligence, to C.M.R. Schwerdt, 3 July 1940.

¹¹Dominions Secretary to Governor, 26 June 1939, and Dominions Secretary to Governor, 30 Aug. 1939, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 37.

¹²Governor to Dominions Secretary, 15 Sept. 1939, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 45-46.

¹³Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988; 2nd ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 116. See also Neary, “Newfoundland and the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement of 27 March 1941,” *Canadian Historical Review* 67, 4 (1986): 493.

¹⁴Secretary of State for External Affairs to Governor of Newfoundland, 2 Sept. 1939, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 41. See also Extract from a Speech by Prime Minister, 8 Sept. 1939, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 43.

¹⁵High Commissioner for Newfoundland to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 3 Dec. 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 115.

¹⁶Extract from a Speech by Prime Minister.

¹⁷J.W. Pickersgill, *The Mackenzie King Record*, 4 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), I, 202; Minutes of a Meeting of War Cabinet Committee, 17 Sept. 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 99. See also Minutes of a Meeting of War Cabinet Committee, 10 June 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, 571. For further examination of Newfoundland's strategic importance, see A.R.M. Lower, "Transition to Atlantic Bastion," in R.A. MacKay, ed., *Newfoundland: Economic, Diplomatic, Strategic Studies* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), 484-508.

¹⁸PANL, GN 38, S4-1-2, File 2: J12(a)-40, Governor to Secretary of State For Dominion Affairs, 5 Apr. 1940.

¹⁹The period from the end of the invasion of Poland in September 1939 to the start of the blitzkrieg in the West in May 1940 is also known as the *Sitzkrieg* due to the lack of any fighting in Europe.

²⁰PANL, GN 38, S4-1-2, File 2: J12-40, Memorandum for Commission, 23 Mar. 1940. See also PANL, GN38, S4-1-4, File 5: J12-40, Memorandum for Commission, 23 Mar. 1940.

²¹C.P. Stacey, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955), 178-80. See also David MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Robert Kavanagh, "W Force: The Canadian Army and the Defence of Newfoundland in the Second World War," MA thesis (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1995).

²²PANL, DO35/725, B-5012, Governor's monthly report for the period ending 30 Sept. 1940. A German U-boat actually did land an unmanned weather station, code-named "Kurt," in northern Labrador in 1943. It was not discovered until decades after the end of the war, and was just one of several manned and unmanned stations the Germans set up along the Arctic Circle during the war. See Michael Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 163-65; Jak Mallman Showell, *U-Boats at War: Landings on Hostile Shores* (London: Ian Allan, 1973; 2nd ed., Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 113-15.

²³PANL, DO35/725, B-5012, minutes of meeting held at the Department of Justice, 29 July 1940, in Governor's monthly report for the period ending 30 Sept. 1940.

²⁴Permanent Joint Board on Defence, Journal of Discussions and Decisions, Report of Service Members, 17 Dec. 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 136-37. See also Governor of Newfoundland to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 7 Jan. 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 139-40; Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Record Group (RG) 24, Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC), Vol. 11956, C.M.R. Schwerdt to Governor, 31 Dec. 1940; Stacey, *Six Years of War*, 541.

²⁵LAC, RG 24, NOIC, Vol. 11, 956, Schwerdt to Governor, 31 Dec. 1940.

²⁶Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Dominions Secretary, 16 Feb. 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 164. For the most recent investigation into the Anglo-American

Leased Bases Agreement see Steven High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere, 1940-1967* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁷H. Duncan Hall, *North American Supply* (London: HMSO, 1955), 139.

²⁸Philip Goodhart, *Fifty Ships That Saved the World: The Foundation of the Anglo-American Alliance* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 172.

²⁹Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman, and Bryon Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964; reprint, US Government Printing Office, 2000), 359.

³⁰High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere*, 67-92, 137-54. See also Conn, Engelman, and Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 354-408; John N. Cardolis, *A Friendly Invasion: The American Military in Newfoundland, 1940 to 1990* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1990), 19.

³¹LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11956, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Governor, 8 Apr. 1941.

³²High Commissioner in Newfoundland to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 3 Dec. 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 115; Secretary of State for External Affairs to Dominions Secretary, 2 Mar. 1941, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 103.

³³Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 33.

³⁴W.A.B. Douglas' *The Creation of a National Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 386.

³⁵Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 29 Oct. 1941, in Bridle, (ed., *Documents*, I, 110.

³⁶Malcolm MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent: The Impact of the Second World War Canadian and American Bases in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Harry Cuff, 1986), 18.

³⁷Permanent Joint Board on Defence, Journal of Discussions and Decisions, Report of Service Members, 17 Dec. 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 136-37. See also Governor of Newfoundland to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 7 Jan., 1941 in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 139-40.

³⁸Permanent Joint Board on Defence, Journal of Discussions and Decisions, Report of Service Members, 17 Dec. 1940, in Bridle, ed., *Documents*, I, 136-37.

³⁹In May 1941, the British Admiralty formed the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF), based at St. John's and made up of mainly RCN warships and personnel, to escort the vital transatlantic convoys to the UK. For the most recent discussion of HMCS *Avalon*, the RCN base at St. John's, see Paul Collins, "From Defended Harbour to Transatlantic Base," in Steven High, ed., *Occupied St. John's: A Social History of a City at War, 1939-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 81-109.

⁴⁰Department of National Defence (DND), Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), NSS-1000-5-20, Vol. 1, Flag Officer Newfoundland (FONF), monthly report, CCNF to NSHQ, 30 June 1941. See also NSS-1000-5-13.5, monthly report on proceedings, Lt.-Cdr. R.U. Langston, RCNR (for NOIC), to NSHQ, 31 Mar. 1941.

⁴¹Roger Sarty, ed., *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996), 155.

⁴²LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, CCNF, monthly report, Aug. 1941.

⁴³LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11,953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Ranger B. Gill to Chief Ranger, 16 Aug. 1941, in CCNF, monthly report, Oct. 1941.

⁴⁴W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 387, 484-85.

⁴⁵"Airline Facilities for Newfoundland: Northeast and Trans-Canada Airlines to Operate," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 5 Mar. 1942. Trans-Canada Airlines was renamed Air Canada in 1965.

⁴⁶LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11951, Brant to Admiral Commanding, Newfoundland, 24 Dec. 1941.

⁴⁷LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11951, Murray to General G.C. Brant, 6 Jan. 1942.

⁴⁸PANL, GN 38, S4-1-6, file 8, Civil Defence Meeting, minutes, 15 Dec. 1941.

⁴⁹Indeed, a book published in 1940 in Britain included, among other useful advice, instructions on protection from splintering window glass, blacking-out windows, and basic first aid. See Lillie B. Horth and Arthur C. Horth, *101 Things to Do in War Time 1940: A Practical Handbook for the Home* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1940; reprint, London: B.T. Batsford, 2007).

⁵⁰PANL, GN 38, S4-1-6, file 8, Civil Defence Meeting, minutes, 15 Dec. 1941.

⁵¹LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Report of Proceedings, St. John's Naval Base, monthly report, Jan. 1942. See also Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, 126.

⁵²PANL, GN 38, S4-1-6, file 8, Civil Defence Meeting, minutes, 15 Dec. 1941. See also A. Fraser, *History of the Participation of Newfoundland in World War II*, ed. Peter Neary and Melvin Baker (St John's: Centre for Newfoundland Studies, 2010), 54-59.

⁵³LAC, FONF, RG 24, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, Vol. 1, FONF monthly report, Jan. 1942.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, Mar. 1942.

⁵⁵LAC, FONF, RG 24, Vol. 11, 951, CTF 24 to FONF, 3 Feb. 1942.

⁵⁶Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada*, 77.

⁵⁷This incident was not reported in the newspapers and, indeed, many people did not learn of the source of the explosions until after the war. Training with and test firing of guns were regular occurrences and the explosions, at least initially, might have been dismissed as such. There is also some question as to whether two or three torpedoes were fired at The Narrows. Rowher claims that only two were fired, while the FONF in his report wrote that three explosions were heard. It is possible that the third explosion was actually an echo from the first hit under Fort Amherst. Jürgen Rowher, *Axis Submarine Successes, 1939-1945* (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1983), 82. LAC, FONF, RG 24, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, Mar. 1942. See also LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 6901, file 8910-166/25, vol. 1, FONF to NSHQ, 5 Mar. 1942, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, Mar. 1942.

⁵⁸LAC, FONF, RG 24, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, Mar. 1942.

⁵⁹Kenneth Wynn, *U-Boat Operations of the Second World War, Vol. 2: Career Histories U511-UIT25* (London: Chatham, 1998), 58-59.

⁶⁰LAC, RG24, Vol. 11927, MS 1400-4, vol. 1, "Instructions Issued to Certain Colonial Dependencies on 'Scorched Earth Policy'," and *ibid.*, Emerson to FONF, 11 Mar. 1942. In May 1998, an Ottawa journalist wrote a series of sensationalized articles whereby he claimed that Canadian naval authorities during World War II had top secret "scorched earth plans"

to burn St. John's to the ground in the event that the Germans tried to occupy it. In fact, naval authorities, with the full knowledge of the Newfoundland government, developed "denial plans" that would have seen only naval facilities and ordnance destroyed. For an in-depth discussion of the RCN's denial plans for St. John's, see Paul Collins, "'Canada's Plan to Torch St. John's' during the Second World War: Upper Canadian Arrogance or Tabloid Journalism?" *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 24, 2 (Fall 2009): 261-70. See also Daniel LeBlanc, "Canada's Plan to Torch St. John's," *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 May 1998; LeBlanc, "Upper-Canadian Arrogance," *Ottawa Citizen*, 31 May 1998; Kerry Badgley, "'Rigorously Applied in Practice': A Scorched Earth Policy for Canada and Newfoundland during the Second World War," *The Archivist* No. 446 (1998): 38-43.

⁶¹LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11927, MS 1400-4, vol. 1, Denial Plans — Naval Installations, Equipment and Supplies, 23 Sept. 1942.

⁶²*Ibid.*, Schwerdt to FONF et al., "'Scorched Earth' Policy Newfoundland," 14 Mar. 1942. LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 5256, file HQS-22-13, "Extract from Minutes of Meeting of Defence Council Held on 7 July 1944."

⁶³LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, May 1942. An additional 2,000 stirrup pumps were on order. Stirrup pumps were portable fire pumps similar to a bicycle pump whereby the user put his foot on the "stirrup" at the bottom and pumped the handle up and down to siphon the extinguishing fluid out of a container, such as a bucket, which then was sprayed at the fire. Fraser, *History of the Participation of Newfoundland in World War II*, 56.

⁶⁴LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, Report of Proceedings by Maintenance Captain, Captain of the Port, in FONF, monthly report, June 1942.

⁶⁵Mallman Showell, *U-Boats at War*, 38-39; Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada*, 116. See also Steve Neary, *The Enemy on Our Doorstep: The German Attacks at Bell Island, Newfoundland, 1942* (St. John's: Jespersion Press, 1994), 7-34.

⁶⁶It would have been impossible to contain the news of the attack as many of the survivors had been rescued and cared for by the local residents and then transported to St. John's. For a discussion of censorship measures undertaken in Newfoundland, see Jeff A. Webb, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 124-25.

⁶⁷LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, FONF, monthly report, Sept. 1942.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Douglas How, *Night of the Caribou* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1988), 72, 85.

⁷⁰"The Town Cast Down in Grief: Caribou Disaster Leaves Twenty-one Widows and Fifty-one Orphans in Port aux Basques and Channel: Funeral of Six Victims Is Held," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 23 Oct. 1942.

⁷¹PANL, GN38, Justice and Defence, S4-1-7, JD 96-42, 10 Nov. 1942, and JD 96(a)-42, 28 Nov. 1942.

⁷²Mallman Showell, *U-Boats at War*, 37-38; Hadley, *U-Boats against Canada*, 152. See also Neary, *Enemy on Our Doorstep*, 49-94. Also on board the U-boat that night was Werner von Janowski, a spy for the Abwehr, the German military intelligence organization. He was eventually landed in the Baie des Chaleurs, between New Brunswick and the Gaspé Peninsula, but was caught within 24 hours and turned into a double agent of dubious value. Von Janowski was one of two agents landed in Canada by U-boats during the war. Alfred

Langbein turned himself in to Naval Intelligence in 1944 having exhausted his Abwehr-supplied funds living quietly in Ottawa and Montreal. See Dean Beeby, *Cargo of Lies: The True Story of a Nazi Double Agent in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁷³TNA/PRO, DO 35/1354, Governor of Newfoundland to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, quarterly report, 31 Dec. 1942.

⁷⁴TNA/PRO, DO 35/1354, Dominion Affairs Office, memorandum, 28 Jan. 1943.

⁷⁵LAC, RG 24, FONF, Vol. 11953, file 1-1-1, vol. 1, FONF, monthly report, Nov. 1942.

⁷⁶Darrin McGrath, *Last Dance: The Knights of Columbus Fire* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2002), 5-16.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 21-45. See also Bassler, *Vikings to U-Boats*, 287-90.

⁷⁸TNA/PRO, DO 35/1354, Governor of Newfoundland to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, quarterly report for the period ending 30 June 1945.