

# HOMELAND STORIES: BATTLES ON THE HOME FRONT

## Character Education

- Integrate home front battles during WWII into the traditionally presented WWII picture
- Learn to assess present dangers based on past examples
- Develop a concept of the development of “Canadian Values”

## Facts

- In 1939 the Royal Canadian Navy consisted of about 10 warships and 3,700 men. By the end of the war, there were 378 warships and nearly 100,000 navy personnel
- German submarines destroyed 23 ships in Canadian territorial waters with the loss of over 500 lives. They landed two spies on Canadian territory and set up a weather station in Labrador
- Twelve RCAF squadrons and 129 Canadian warships received Battle Honours for their contribution to the defense of Canada during *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*

## Before the Reading

- Why do you think the information about German submarine and the loss of life in Canada’s territorial waters were played down during WWII?
- What does it take to be a hero today?
- Look at a map that shows the Gulf of St. Lawrence area to find Cap Chat, Gaspé Peninsula, Cabot Strait, Port aux Basques, North Sydney, New Carlisle, St. Martins (N.B) and Strait of Belle Isle

## Reading – Battles on the Home Front

### The Battle of the St. Lawrence

We tend to think of World Wars taking place “over there”, somewhere far away from Canada. Most of the attention to World War II is focussed on Europe with some attention paid to the war in the Pacific, Northern Africa and Burma.

## HOMELAND MINUTES



Nstr. Agnes Wightman Wilkie, RCN Seaports and The Shipping World

Cold Comfort: Navy Nursing Sisters: Sub-Lieutenant Margaret Brooke, M.B.E. and Sub-Lieutenant Agnes Wilkie

*“When the torpedo hit it stunned me. Agnes got up quickly however and we rushed to our lifeboat on the port side. It had been shot away. Agnes didn’t know how to put her lifebelt on so I did it for her. They helped us onto a capsized lifeboat. There were about a dozen of us. We clung to ropes. The waves kept washing us off, one by one. And eventually Agnes said she was getting cramped. She let go, but I managed to catch hold of her with one hand. I held to her as best I could until day-break. Finally, a wave took her .... When I called to her, she didn’t answer.”*

These recollections from a hospital interview of Margaret Brooke describe the night of October 14, 1942, when she clung to a capsized lifeboat in the frigid waters of Cabot Strait struggling for hours to keep her friend Agnes Wilkie alive. The torpedoed ferry *Caribou* on which they had been passengers had sunk in five minutes.

The immediate sounds of the boilers exploding, steel

being rent, human screeches and the terrified howling of 50 cows drowning<sup>iii</sup> turned to the sounds of prayer as the night wore on. One survivor reported they sang “Nearer my God to Thee”. For hours Brooke and her friend held on to ropes as the waves crashed over them. As hypothermia set in, however, the slight Wilkie weighing only around 62 kilograms, had no more strength. In spite of Brooke’s heroic efforts to hang on to her with one arm, when a minesweeper appeared at daybreak to rescue survivors only Margaret Brooke and a few men still clung to the overturned lifeboat.

Agnes Wilkie, the daughter of John and Helen Wilkie of Carman, Manitoba was 39 years old when she died. She had worked as an Operating Room Nurse at Misericordia Hospital before enlisting and held the position of Assistant Matron of the naval hospital, RCNH Avalon at her death. Lieutenant Agnes Wilkie was put to rest with full military honours at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Newfoundland.

A photograph of Wilkie was hung in all Canadian Naval Hospitals, her name was given to a nurses’ residence in Halifax and in 1957 Wilkie Lake in Manitoba was named for her. Lieutenant Margaret Brooke, a naval dietician, went on to become a geology instructor at the University of Saskatchewan. She was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire for her heroic actions.



“... if there were any Canadians who did not realize that we were up against a ruthless and remorseless enemy, there can be no such Canadian now. If anything were needed to prove the hideousness of Nazi warfare, surely this is it. Canada can never forget the SS Caribou” Naval Minister Macdonald, House of Commons October 17, 1942.

Thanks to Charles Rhéaume, Historian, Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters for his assistance with information on Agnes Wilkie



Scotia Pier after Torpedo Attack  
Photo: Gerald Milne Moses  
Library and Archives Canada  
(PA-188854)

Battles on Canadian soil or in Canadian waters? Surely not since 1812!

Although *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*, was only a part of the much larger *Battle of the North Atlantic*, German submarine action in the St. Lawrence

River, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Strait of Belle Isle and Cabot Strait between 1942 and 1944, brought the war into Canadian territorial waters—even on to Canadian soil. War-time censorship kept the worst details of the marauding Nazi wolf pack from the Canadian people. But as ships exploded, debris and bodies washed ashore and blackout curtains became mandatory, Canadians on the east coast and along the St. Lawrence River saw Canada’s vulnerability. They also experienced home front heroism very personally.

September 11, 1942, residents of Cap Chat, on the northern side of Gaspé Peninsula, watched in horror as the HMCS *Charlottetown* was torpedoed and went down within four minutes. Eight men lost their lives during the bold daylight attack by *U 517*. Seaman John Garland was one. When the Captain gave order to abandon ship, Seaman Garland, who couldn’t swim, went below to rescue Screechi, the ship’s mascot. Garland didn’t know that the beloved dog had already been tossed to safety. Survivors



S.S. Caribou, [www.heritage.nf.ca](http://www.heritage.nf.ca)

bravely faced nine freezing hours before being safely landed.

The worst disaster of *The Battle of the St. Lawrence* occurred in the early morning hours of October 14, 1942. The torpedoed S.S. *Caribou*, a Newfoundland Rail Ferry plying Cabot Strait between North Sydney and Port aux Basques, sunk in five minutes with the loss of 137 lives. The *Caribou* passengers included military personnel and military families travelling to join loved ones. Only one of the 11 children on board survived.

Thirty-four bodies from the *Caribou* were landed, many by skiffs out of Port aux Basques. The bodies of Royal Navy Nursing Sister Agnes Wilkie and Merchant Navy Stewardess Bride Fitzpatrick were brought in together. Stewardess Fitzpatrick was wearing her uniform great coat over her pyjamas. Wilkie and Fitzpatrick were the only female members of the Canadian Navy and Merchant Navy to lose their lives due to enemy action during WWII.

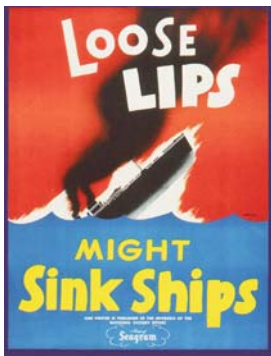


German contact mine in waters off Nova Scotia, 2 June 1943.  
H.H.Black | DND National Archives Canada | PA-178962

The disastrous 1942 season with 21 ships sunk, more damaged and the loss of over 300 lives led Prime Minister Mackenzie King to shut the St. Lawrence Seaway to shipping. Canada's railroads carried the vital war supplies to Sydney and Halifax where they headed off

by convoy in support of the Allied war efforts.

Even with convoy protection, by October 1942, 56 ships carrying over 258,000 tonnes of materials had been sunk in the air gap between Greenland and Iceland where the Nazi wolf pack hunted unmolested by Allied air protection that could not reach that far. Hitler realized that to defeat Britain and her Allies it was vital to cut off the supplies of food, war machinery and troops coming from North America.



War Poster  
McGill Library Collection /  
WP2.D5.F1

With the vast bulk of the Canadian Navy sent to North Africa to assist with *Operation Torch* in November 1942<sup>ii</sup>, German Admiral Doenitz, determined to demoralize the Canadian war effort and establish a bulkhead for espionage. He hoped to land spies and establish a weather station on Canadian soil so that the German navy would have the

intelligence to disrupt convoy traffic even more. Doenitz eventually dedicated 16 U-Boats to the three stages of *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*.

*U 217* landed Marius Langbein near St. Martins, New Brunswick May 1942, and *U 518* landed Werner von Janowski at New Carlisle, Quebec, November 1942. Fortunately neither Langbein nor Janowski proved to be valuable spy assets. Langbein changed his mind about going to Halifax to transmit shipping information; he decamped to Ottawa where over a few years he squandered the \$7,000 in \$50 American bank notes he'd been given by the German *Abwehr*/Spy Agency. Alfred Langbein never did transmit any information.

Janowski was arrested by the RCMP on a CNR train headed to Montreal after a tip from the new Carlisle Hotel manager. Janowski had blown his cover when he used Belgian matches and outdated currency. When arrested, he was carrying a long range radio transmitter.

Even Hollywood capitalized on the theme of German spies in Canada. In 1943 *Error Flynn* starred as a Canadian Mountie in *Northern Pursuit*. Set in the wilds around Hudson Bay, Flynn infiltrated a spy ring masterminded by a downed Nazi pilot escaped from a PoW camp. The dastardly Nazi plan was to access a secretly hidden plane to bomb the St. Lawrence Seaway. Screenwriter Diana Hamilton had to have been following *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*.

German Admiral Wilhelm Canaris ordered the next assault on Canada. On October 22, 1943, Peter Schrewe, Captain of *U 537* landed 10 men plus Professor Kurt Sommermeyer, a Siemens scientist specialized in meteorological equipment and two of the professor's assistants on land near Killiniq Island in Labrador. It was the first time that a force of armed men from the Third Reich stood on Canadian soil.

In four hours the men unloaded and carried 10 steel canisters weighing about 100 kg each to the top of a rocky hill where the technicians assembled Weather Station Kurt for which Siemens had developed 20 prototypes. They tested the unit which contained a 150 watt Lorenz 150 FK type transmitter powered by the canisters filled with dry nickel-cadmium high voltage batteries. It worked. The automatic device was capable of delivering weather conditions via transmitted radio impulses to all the U-boats in the north-west Atlantic. Advantage Germany.

Fortunately, like Langbein and Janowski, Weather Station Kurt turned out to be a dud. Whether it was the malfunction of the newly patented Siemens device or accidental jamming by the German command, the automated station worked only for a few days. None of the attempts to repair the station succeeded.

*The Battle of the St. Lawrence* wound down in 1943 and 1944. Although U-Boats had crept within 300 km of Quebec City in October 1942, and had twice attempted to pluck escaped German PoWs from the shores of the Bay of Chaleur, near New Carlisle Quebec, the attacks of the Nazi wolf pack had diminished.

One final devastating attack took place November 25, 1944. *U 1228* about to head back to Germany due to damaged snorkel equipment opportunistically fired off a newly developed electric homing torpedo called the Gnat. The HMCS *Shwanigan* on patrol in the Cabot Strait went down with all 91 hands. Only six bodies were recovered.

In spite of the loss of Canadian lives and ships in Canadian waters, between 1942 and 1944, 443 convoys in the Gulf of St. Lawrence area successfully escorted 2,262 ships. They supported ferries, protected the ship-

ping in the re-opened St. Lawrence and moved personnel and supplies that assisted with the building of air bases on Newfoundland.

German Admirals Doenitz and Canaris had miscalculated. Canadians had not become demoralized by German activities during *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*. Canadians persevered, expanded their navy to 378 ships, the third largest in the world then, and became a highly specialized anti-submarine force.

During the course of the war, Canadian warships escorted 25,343 merchant ships transporting 183.6 million tonnes of cargo. They provided a pivotal lifeline for Britain and its Allies. The Canadian Navy destroyed 23 U-boats, captured 24. These successes did not come without a price. Twenty-four Royal Canadian Navy ships went down with the loss of 1,981 lives.

Remembrance Day is about remembering and not just the battles “over there”. German U-boats posed significant dangers to Canadian territory and cut a deadly path through Canadian territorial waters. *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*, which penetrated far into Canada during WWII, stands symbolically today as a warning that dangers might be closer to home than we suspect.

### After the Reading

- What details about *The Battle of the St. Lawrence* do you find most astounding?
- Why did the Germans attack Canada, send spies and try to set up a weather station?
- Do the math. Taking the 1945 total number of Canadian navy vessels and the total number of ships lost, what percentage of Canadian ships were lost? Also, what was the average number of ships per convoy?
- What acts of heroism or signs of “Canadian values” do you see in this reading?

### Extensions

- The RCAF employed 17 Squadrons in anti-submarine warfare some of which were from training schools and units. Research these squadrons and report on their activities
- The Gulf of St. Lawrence convoys went between Corner Brook and Sydney, Quebec and Labrador and Quebec and Sydney. Research what they were transporting and why.
- The activity of Canadian ports during WWI led to the Halifax explosion of 1917. Read one of fictions based

on this explosion: *Barometer Rising* (MacLennan), *Burden of Desire* (MacNeil), *Black Snow* (Tattie), *A Wedding in December* (Shreve), *Until I Find You* (Irving) or *The Birth House* (McKay). Based on your WWI novel, which incident in the reading about *The Battle of the St. Lawrence* would make the best source material for a WWII novel? Why?

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### Audio Video Clips

- CBC Digital Archives, “U-boat sinks SS Caribou off Newfoundland” [archives.cbc.ca/on\\_this\\_day/10/14/](http://archives.cbc.ca/on_this_day/10/14/)
- Davis, Barry, “Fate of the Caribou” [www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/24/fate.htm](http://www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/24/fate.htm)

i Garland’s mother was touched when surviving crew members presented Screech to her a few weeks after the sinking of the Charlottetown

ii 17 Canadian corvettes were sent to North Africa in support of Operation Torch

iii There were three rail cars of cattle in the Caribou’s number one hold with three hatches off to give fresh air