

October Meeting

Topic: “The Unknown War/Battle of the St. Lawrence”

Speaker: Peter A. Dixon Lt, RCN (Ret'd)
CD, MA, BA, Cms

Reporter: Gord McNulty

Our first speaker of the fall season was introduced by CAHS Toronto Chapter Programs Co-ordinator Bob Winson. Peter A. Dixon, “a fifth-generation Torontonian,” graduated from George S. Henry Secondary School in Don Mills and then Carleton University in 1977. After joining the Navy League Cadet program in 1965, Peter received an award as the most outstanding Royal Canadian Sea Cadet in Ontario in 1969. He earned a Navy League of Canada university entrance scholarship and enrolled at Carleton University. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant on the Canadian Armed Forces Cadet Instructor list in 1973 and served until 2002. During that period, he was promoted to Captain in 1977, and graduated with a BA from Carleton. In 1979, Peter accompanied 30 sea cadets on a Caribbean ops naval deployment and served as assistant navigating officer on HMCS Preserver. His post-deployment report

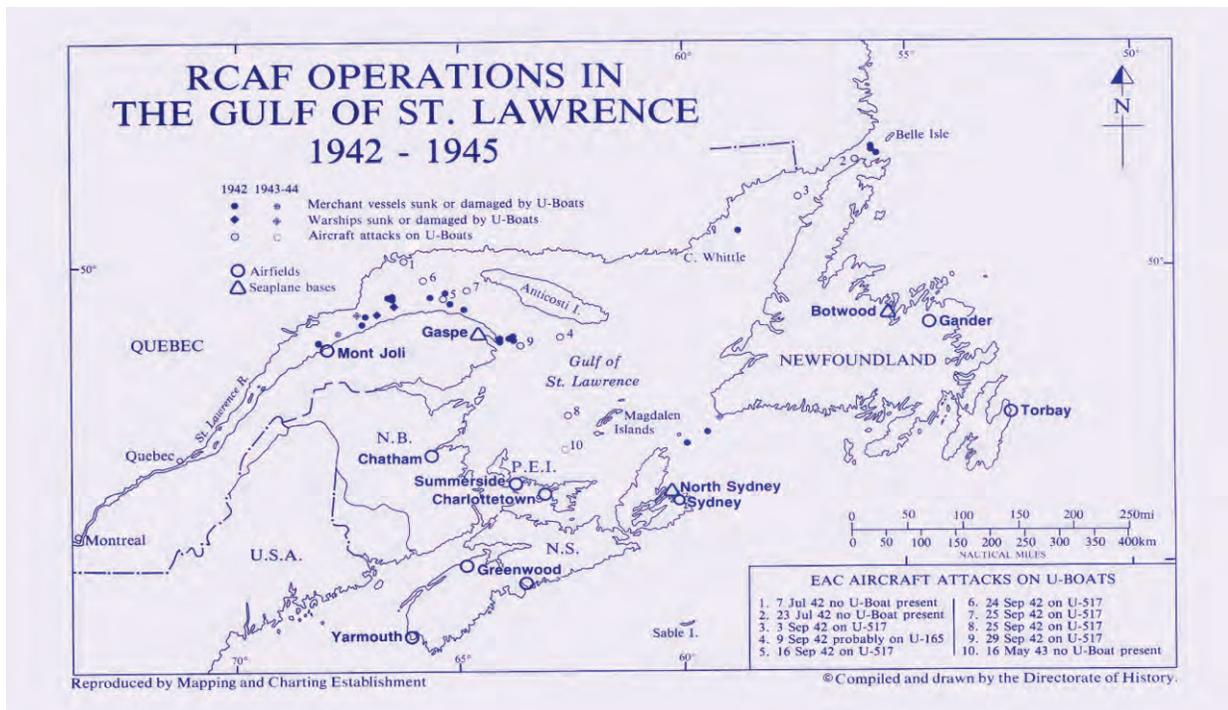
became the standard for all subsequent sea cadet training deployments. In 1989, he was appointed training adviser for sea cadets in central Ontario. He was appointed Commanding Officer of a Sea Cadet corps in Newmarket (RCSCC Patriot) and later, in 2000, a CO in Brampton (RCSCC Illustrious). During his tenure with Illustrious, the corps set a record of qualifying or competing in 11 provincial competitions in crewman seamanship.

In 1993, Peter was awarded a Certificate in Museum Studies and was the first person to complete all nine courses in two years. He received his designation as a curator from the Ontario Museum Association in that year. In 1994, Peter was awarded a Clasp to his Canadian Forces Decoration, recognizing 22 years of service. He is an author as well. In 1995, he published “I will never forget the sound of those engines going away,” in Canadian Military History. In 1996, he published “If we lose the war at sea, we lose the war,” covering the story of Long-Range Aircraft and the Battle of the Atlantic, published at Royal Military College. Peter graduated from RMC with a Master of Arts (Honours) in War Studies in 1999. He was the first Cadet Instructor Officer to attend and graduate from RMC. Peter was the Deck Officer/Operations Officer and finally, Manager of HMCS Haida Naval Museum, while the Haida was on Toronto's waterfront before it was refurbished and relocated to its current home at HMCS Star on Hamilton Harbour. In 2003, he was awarded a Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal. In 2005, he was elected a director of the Toronto Sea Cadet Alumni Association, and made Officer in charge of the colour party. In 2009, he was elected a director of the RMC Club of Canada, Toronto Branch Alumni. In September, 2010, he was accepted in the Doctoral Program at Walden University.



Speakers: Peter Dixon

Photo Credit - Neil McGavock



RCAF Operations in The Gulf of St. Lawrence 1942-1945

Courtesy - The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force Volume II

Peter began by saying that he has ultimate respect for the Royal Canadian Navy, past and present. He noted that both of his parents were naval veterans. His father was a sub-lieutenant in the RCNVR, and was on loan to the Royal Navy where he saw action, including the sinking of a U-boat, and then went to the Far East. He was awarded the Burma Star. His mother was an Ordinary Wren “sparker” radio operator, serving at Moncton, NB, and once reported a U-boat in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1944. The battle in the Gulf of St. Lawrence from 1942 to 1944 is described as “Canada's unknown war.” It is only in the past 10 years that the story has received extensive coverage. Many Canadians don't realize that the war came to Canada. Twenty-three merchant ships, and four warships, were lost in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to U-boats. More than 360 lives were lost. Thirteen German submarines were involved. Many Canadians are unaware that U-boats advanced to within 300 kilometres of Quebec City. Peter maintained it can be said that when considering all of the casualties, Canada lost the war in the Gulf despite the ultimate victory in the Battle of the Atlantic.

The danger posed by the menace of long-range U-boats in the Gulf had been underlined in 1917, when the Germans deployed U-boats to the East Coast of the United States and the Bay of Fundy. They sank 16 fishing vessels. Trawlers served as lookouts for the U-boats. The officer in charge of the patrols, Walter Hose, became Chief of Naval Staff in the 1930s and is considered to be the founder of the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve. Defence planning in the 1930s had primarily envisioned enemy surface vessels attacking the coast, as the Germans had been forbidden from building submarines under the Treaty of Versailles. The ill-equipped RCN entered the war in 1939 with six destroyers, four minesweepers and three small training vessels. None of the destroyers had sonar, anti-submarine detection equipment. From the start, the RCN focused on defence of convoys as Canada accelerated a shipbuilding program to wage the deadly struggle against U-boats. Started in February, 1940, the program included 28 Bangor-class minesweepers and 40 Flower-class corvettes. Various small ships --- including armed yachts, corvettes, motor launches and motor torpedo boats --- were to report an attack and all ships were to be diverted to the scene of an attack.

However, crews were untrained and untested and shipping in the St. Lawrence was highly vulnerable. When the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor, and Hitler declared war on the U.S., Grand Admiral Karl Donitz embarked on Operation Drumbeat. He deployed U-boats, which had great endurance, to attack shipping in the North Atlantic to devastating effect. The U-boats came ever closer to Canada's Atlantic seaboard and soon drew blood. The first, U-553, reached the Gulf of St. Lawrence in May, 1942. Off the coast of the Gaspé Peninsula, it sank the British merchant ship *Nicoya*, with the loss of six merchant seamen, and the Dutch steamer *Leto*, with the loss of 12. After survivors were picked up, the government reacted with heavy censorship. The naval minister, Angus Macdonald, declared "any possible future sinkings in this area will not be made public, in order that information of value to the enemy may be withheld from him." Peter noted the censorship is one of the reasons why many details about the battle aren't known.



Hudson Bomber on Patrol
Courtesy - Shearwater Aviation Museum

Peter briefly referred to the instrumental role played by RCAF Eastern Air Command in the struggle against the U-boat, as outlined in the February 2012 presentation to the Chapter by Dr. Richard Goette and Dr. Geoff Hayes (*Flypast*, Vol. 46, Number 5). By 1942, EAC had almost 100 aircraft available, though most were assigned to protecting convoys in the North Atlantic. Unarmed training stations based in Mont Joli, ten miles west of Rimouski, and at Charlottetown and Summerside, PEI, were part of the anti-submarine deterrent force and provided bases for patrol flights over the river and the gulf. The next intrusion was made in July, 1942, by U-132, which attacked the Greek steamer *Anastasios Pateras*, killing three firemen on duty, and the Belgian steamer *Hainut*, with the loss of one fireman. On July 31, 1942, Eastern Air Command recorded its first submarine kill near Sable Island when a Hudson flown by Sqdn. Ldr. N.E. Small of RCAF Bomber Reconnaissance 113 Sqdn. attacked and sank U-754. With its white camouflage, the Hudson was difficult to see through the summer haze and the cruising U-boat was taken unaware. Squadron Leader Small was the first

squadron commander in Eastern Air command to introduce white aircraft camouflage and high altitude patrols in accordance with the latest British methods.

HMCS Raccoon, an armed yacht, was sunk, with all hands lost, by U-165 on Sept. 7, 1942. Then, on Oct. 14, 1942, U-69 sank the Newfoundland Railway ferry Caribou, claiming 136 lives including women and children among 237 passengers. The ferry, escorted by a destroyer, had been travelling at night and the German commander mistook the two ships for a destroyer and a freighter. The sinking of the Caribou was the worst inshore disaster of the Battle of the Gulf. Faced with such a heavy loss of life, the navy released full information immediately. Accidental mishaps were another hazard. In October 21, 1943, HMCS Chedabucto, a minesweeper, was involved in a night collision with the cable vessel Lord Kelvin and sank with the loss of one officer. October, 1942, has been described as the cruellest month of the battle. As losses increased, near to the Gaspé shore and deep into the river, the government decided to close the St. Lawrence to international shipping. The RCN was tasked with the job of escorting convoys out of New York. The embargo lasted until 1944. It created huge transportation problems for rail companies, as there was only one railway from Montreal to Halifax.

One of the more colourful episodes of the battle occurred in early November, 1942. U-518 was on a "special mission" to put ashore an agent asked to carry out espionage and organize sabotage. U-518 cruised through the Cabot Strait, toward New Carlisle, Quebec. At 12.30 a.m. on Nov. 9, a dinghy cast off, rowed by a crewman and carrying the spy. The agent, Werner Janowski, spent a cold night on the rocky beach before, at sunrise, making his way up the coastal bluffs and hitching a car ride into New Carlisle. He appeared at the Carlisle Hotel, asking for breakfast and a room where he could bathe before going to the railway station. The innkeepers were suspicious, especially when the stranger paid in oversize pre-1935 banknotes of a kind that the new Bank of Canada, founded in 1937, had been withdrawing from circulation. He also dropped a box of matches manufactured in Belgium. Janowski was arrested at the train station, admitted he had been a German officer and agreed to be a double agent. Janowski's RCMP handlers kept watch on him for the rest of the war. No record exists of Janowski's fate after the war; however, it is assumed that he was repatriated. The initial five-month U-boat campaign in the St. Lawrence ended late in 1942, then the Germans returned for another five months in 1944. Defence preparations continued until the end of the war in May 1945. The last major confrontation came in the Cabot Strait, between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, when the corvette HMCS Shawinigan was torpedoed by U-1228 on Nov. 25, 1944. All 91 crewmen were killed. It was the RCN's greatest loss in the Battle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Peter maintained there are two ways of looking at the outcome. Some historians portray this as a victory for Canada, with the U-boats never returning as a result of Eastern Air Command and the RCN steadily improving the effectiveness of maritime defence. Peter said it can also be argued that Donitz simply concluded the Gulf of St. Lawrence wasn't as good a hunting ground for submarines compared to other areas. The struggle had other interesting developments. For example, Peter mentioned "weather station Kurt," an automatic weather station at Martin Bay on the northern tip of Labrador, that was erected by the crew of U-537 in October, 1943. The weather station remained undisturbed by locals. After the story came to attention in 1981, the rusted remains were picked up by the crew of the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis St Laurent in 1981. The equipment was refurbished and is now on display at the Canadian War Museum.

Peter answered a number of questions. He said the St. Lawrence is more than 600 feet deep, and the U-boats --- depending on the type --- could safely dive to 300 feet. Armed yachts, such as the Raccoon, were private yachts that had been obtained from the U.S. and made into warships to provide a stopgap while the shipbuilding program was under way. They provided protection for the

Sydney to Quebec convoys. One armed yacht, HMCS Vison, provided protection for the Caribou before it was sunk. Peter's presentation gave Chapter members a comprehensive overview of the fascinating story of how the Second World War came to Canada's doorstep. Chapter President, Dr. George Topple, presented Peter with a book in appreciation of his informative talk. The latest book on this subject is *War in the St. Lawrence: The Forgotten U-Boat Battles on Canada's Shores*, by Roger Sarty (Penguin, 2012), which is part of the History of Canada Series. Further reading includes *The Battle of the St. Lawrence: The Second World War In Canada*, by Nathan M. Greenfield (HarperCollins, 2004), and *Canadians in the Battle of the Atlantic*, (Folklore, 2007), by Larry Gray.

49th Annual CAHS National Convention and AGM, Saint John, NB, 6-8 Sept., 2012:

Former CAHS Toronto Chapter President Howard Malone provided the following report on this year's highly successful convention, superbly hosted by New Brunswick's Turnbull Chapter. About 72 people, from as far as Vancouver and the Prairie provinces, attended. The theme of the convention was "First in the Air, New Brunswick's Place In Canadian aviation" Among the highlights was an impressive opening ceremony --- dedication of a community cenotaph at Wade-Myles Park at the former Millidgeville Municipal Airport, the original Saint John airport. The moving ceremony took place in the auditorium of M. Gerald Teed Memorial School. A strong RCAF presence was highlighted, in recognition of the Re-Affiliation and Granting of the Freedom of the City of Saint John to 410 (City of Saint John) Sqdn. Two CF-18s from 410 were expected for a planned flypast, but were grounded by poor weather and events were held indoors. Millidgeville Airport has a strong symbolic connection to the air force through the heroism of the "Millidgeville Three". Pilot Officer Duncan Hewitt, Flight Lieutenant Harry Hamilton and Pilot Officer Pat Sclanders all trained at Millidgeville and all three died during the Battle of Britain respectively, 12 July 1940, 29 Aug. 1940 and 09 Sept. 1940 while serving with the Royal Air Force. Participants in the ceremony included schoolchildren, who outlined various chapters in New Brunswick's aviation history, as well as a range of high-ranking dignitaries including the lieutenant-governor, the mayor, the Saint Mary's Band, and others. Several commemorative paintings were unveiled at the school, which has an excellent collection of aviation art and photos.



The Millidgeville Three
Photo Credit - Gord McNulty

Convention delegates enjoyed fine speakers, the spouses' program with interesting tours, the downtown Delta Brunswick Hotel adjacent to the Brunswick Square shopping complex, and even a lobster supper at HMCS Brunswicker. There was also a book launch. Don McKay, who served with the RCAF and later with Air Canada for 31 years, has written *My Dream and Beyond: A Pilot's*

Journey (General Store Publishing House). Unfortunately, Howard never met Don during their Air Canada days. Don flew out of Montreal, while Howard flew out of Toronto. At the closing banquet, Toronto Chapter 1st Vice-President and Membership Secretary, Sheldon Benner, was named the first recipient of the Bill Wheeler Volunteer Award, presented to a CAHS member who has significantly contributed to the CAHS. Congratulations, Sheldon! This honour is really well-deserved. The Ottawa Chapter will host the 2013 convention, expected to be held in the fall, possibly in conjunction with Vintage Wings of Canada's "Wings Over Ottawa-Gatineau."*Howard Malone*

The contents of this article were originally presented to the CAHS Toronto Chapter at a previous meeting or event. All / or some material has been edited and adapted for this website. Many thanks to CAHS Toronto Chapter for their courtesy in the use of this material. CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting & Membership information is available elsewhere on this website.