

The St. Lawrence Struggle: WWII comes to Canada

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During the Second World War, Canada played a monumental role in the effort against the Axis Forces in almost every theatre of war. Each command had its renowned battlefields. For the army, these included the hills of Italy, the assaults on the Gold Beaches during the invasion of Normandy and the liberation of Holland. For the Air Force, it was the enormous effort put forward by Canadian flyers during the Battle of Britain. In the case of the Navy, it was its participation and eventual command of the northern Atlantic shipping and escort routes. Moreover, this particular action is by far the most well known of the Navy's accomplishments during the Second World War. Very little is known about the Navy's efforts on a more domestic scale. This is the story of the RCN's efforts to protect home-waters, and their response to any threats close to home. These include the adaptation of safeguards as the war progressed, and how the impact of the war in local waters changed the Canadian Government's policy on the defense of the St. Lawrence.

On September 8, 1939, the day that Canada declared war on Germany, Prime Minister Mackenzie King drew the attention of coastal defense along Canada's shores to the House of Commons: "The safety of Canada depends on the adequate safeguarding of our coastal regions and the great avenues which approach the heart of this country. Foremost among these is the St. Lawrence River and Gulf." Although this warning was heard, it went largely unheeded. Serious attention was only drawn to the task of the defense of the St. Lawrence after the sinking of the British freighter *SS Nicoya* and the Dutch freighter *SS Leto* by submarine. At this point in time, the St. Lawrence was protected by a Bangor-class minesweeper, two Fairmile motor launches and an armed yacht. Along with these extremely sparse sea-based countermeasures, were a series of converted naval guns lodged in solid concrete bunkers at Gaspé, near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. These included several 4.5 inch guns and a single enormous 10 inch gun. These emplacements although sizeable, were ineffective against submarines. This was epitomized in the sinking of three freighters, two Greek and one Canadian on September 7, 1942, right on the doorstep of these emplacements. In response to the sinking of the *Nicoya* and *Leto*, the RCN allocated five Flower-Class Corvettes, which turned an almost non-existent force into a severely undersized defense



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fleet. After this allocation, things only got worse, as the Summer and Fall of 1942 saw the sinking or damaging of seventeen vessels, including the unarmed *SS Caribou*, a ferry which was sunk with a large loss of civilian life. In response, the Government of Canada ordered an embargo on the St. Lawrence area, limiting it to only local trade. This pushed the protection of large merchant ships farther out to the coast, where they could be protected by local escort warships. This embargo lasted until 1944, and was considered an effective decision as no shipping was lost in the St. Lawrence during the years of limited trade. This was the result of fewer large targets, and declining U-boat numbers due to the entrance of the United States into the war, and the weakening of German shipbuilding production. In the Fall of 1944, the embargo was lifted as the RCN had grown in numbers and training to the point that they felt they could ensure the safety of shipping through the St. Lawrence River. This was for the most part true, and only as the end of the war loomed closer, and U-boat attacks became more desperate, that five vessels were sunk in the St. Lawrence. None of these vessels were merchantmen and all but one was a Canadian warship. This, nevertheless, was a pittance in comparison to the twenty-three sunk during 1942.

During the early period of the war, most Canadians saw the conflict as a largely European affair.

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This would change abruptly after the first incursions of U-boats into the St. Lawrence. People along coastal settlements were terrified when ships were being sunk off of their shoreline. Although strongly censored by the Canadian Government, local gossip spread about bodies and freight washing up on the shore following the U-boat raids. The response by the public was swift and vocal; they expected that protection of home-water took precedence over convoy duties. The decision to place a trade embargo on the area was a combination of the RCN's lack of ships to efficiently protect the massive stretch of water, coupled with a strong dedication of navy leadership to the agenda of shipping goods to Europe. The government understood that along with the difficulty of protecting the shipping, the U-boat attacks were having a negative impact on the Canadian war effort. By pushing the shipping farther

out, they could both protect the shipping and roll these losses into those considered to be in the North Atlantic. This effectively satisfied the public while also ensuring the survivability of shipping.

The battle for the St. Lawrence was a decisive action by the Royal Canadian Navy to protect local shipping, along with the essential flow of material to Europe. The actions of a dedicated few, who were under-equipped and often under-trained, ensured the safety of their brethren. Still, even with their heroic actions, over 40,000 imperial tones of cargo were lost in the St. Lawrence River and estuary, and eventually the problem was rectified more through bureaucratic process than by the blood and sweat of RCN sailors. Nevertheless, the Battle of the St. Lawrence was a decisive battle and victory for the Royal Canadian Navy.

