

An Historical Vignette – HMCS Valleyfield sunk – 6 May 1944

Researched and written by William (Bill) Dziadyk, author of “[S.S. Nerissa, the Final Crossing](#)”

The River-class frigate **HMCS Valleyfield** (K329) was built by Morton Engineering and Dry Dock Company in Quebec City. The work started in November 1942. A year later on 7 Dec 43, she was commissioned into the RCN, with LCdr Dermot Thomas English, RCNR as her captain. After arrival (20 Dec) in Halifax, the frigate and crew completed “work ups” in St. Margaret's Bay and Bermuda waters. In February, she joined the *1st Canadian Escort Group* (**EG-C1**). Her first convoy (14-17 Feb 44) was **XB-96** Halifax to Boston - 25 merchants escorted by *Valleyfield* and 3 corvettes.

Author's Note: In records of the sinking of HMCS Valleyfield, RCN messages used GMT and the U-boat log used Berlin time (GMT+2). In this vignette, local times (GMT-3) are used unless otherwise indicated. Distances are in nautical miles (1.85 km), and abbreviated “nm”.

Her second convoy was **SC-154** which departed Halifax on 28 Feb 44 and was bound for Liverpool. However, she and corvette *HMCS Regina* (K234) were detached to escort a tug towing the damaged convoy rescue ship *SS Dundee* to the Azores for repairs. Later on 14 March, *Valleyfield* and *Regina* departed the Azores. After a grounding in the Azores, the Bangor-class minesweeper *HMCS Mulgrave* (J313) was under tow by *Valleyfield* for repairs in Liverpool. Three days later they joined convoy **SL-151** from Sierra Leone which joined up with convoy **MKS-42** to Liverpool.

HMCS Valleyfield was one of seven escorts in convoy **ONS-32** (50 Merchants) which departed Liverpool on 28 March and was bound for Halifax. At the *Western Ocean Meeting Point* (WESTOMP - about 200 nm south-east of Cape Race at latitude 49°W) on 13 April, the convoy was passed to escorts of the RCN *Western Local Escort Force* for the final approaches to Halifax.

About two weeks later, *Valleyfield's* fourth convoy was **ON-234** (73 Merchants) which departed Londonderry on 26 April and was bound for New York City. The six escorts were from the *1st Canadian Escort Group* (**EG-C1**). The lead ship was the frigate **HMCS Valleyfield** with the Senior Officer (Cdr John Byron, RNR) embarked. The five corvettes were: **HMCS Halifax** (K237) (Lt M. F. Oliver, RCNR); **HMCS Frontenac** (K335), (LCdr E.T.F. Wennberg, RCNVR); **HMCS Giffard** (K402) (LCdr C. Peterson, RCNR); **HMCS Edmundston** (K106) (LCdr R.D. Barrett, RCNR); and **HMCS Fredericton** (K245) (LCdr J.E. Harrington, RCNVR). The transit across the North Atlantic to WESTOMP was relatively uneventful. The only exception was that the corvette *Fredericton* had been escorting a straggler since 3 May and would be proceeding independently with the straggler.

Some operational context - On 25 April, U-548 (Eberhar Zimmermann) had been providing weather reports and patrolling the southern approaches to the Denmark Strait, between Greenland and Iceland, when an Enigma encoded message from the Admiral Commanding U-boats (Hans-Georg von Friedeburg) was received (03:56 GMT+2) instructing U-548 to proceed to operational areas off St. John's and South-East of Cape Race. On the first of May, U-548 arrived about 20 nm off St John's. At 18:10, she surfaced to ventilate and immediately crashed dived when a 4-engine aircraft (range 9000 meters) was sighted. The RCAF B-24 Liberator bomber had also sighted the U-boat. On 2 May, U-548 proceeded down the coast to about 7 nm East of Calvert (18:00 local, 24:00 GMT+2). The ice had made it difficult to proceed at periscope depth and about half of the time the U-boat was surfaced. She had been seen again, perhaps by a fisherman who reported a sighting. Flag Officer Newfoundland, dispatched the frigate HMS Harwood (K582) and RCAF aircraft to the area. At 01:57 GMT+2, 3 May (local time 20:57, 2 May) the U-boat surfaced east of Conception Bay, and the British frigate was directly ahead at 3000 meters. The U-boat immediately fired an acoustic torpedo which missed. An RCAF Liberator arrived on the scene, and mistakenly illuminated the frigate while the U-boat opened fire on the aircraft. The aircraft wrongly assumed that the frigate had opened fire, and left the scene ... while U-548 escaped for another day.

On 6 May at 12:20, U-548 was at periscope depth and patrolling about 55 nm 115° off Cape Race, when Zimmermann sighted two “escort destroyers” at range 800 meters heading north at 16 knots. These ships would have been the corvettes *HMCS Timmins* and *HMCS Agassiz*, which had been carrying out anti-submarine (A/S) sweeps. The corvettes passed by quickly over the horizon and U-548 did not engage. Later at 16:30, *Valleyfield* and the **EG-C1** corvettes received a signal from *Flag Officer, Newfoundland* warning of the presence of a U-boat within 150 miles of the Avalon Peninsula. This intelligence would have been based on the 2 May incident east of Conception Bay ... and likely the receipt of an Admiralty ULTRA message related to Bletchley Park having decrypted the (25 Apr) message ordering U-548 to proceed to operational areas off St. John's and South-East of Cape Race.

An hour later at 17:35, the convoy was handed over to the RCN *Western Local Escort Force* (1 Frigate, 4 Corvettes, and 3 Minesweepers with the Senior Officer in the minesweeper *HMCS St. Boniface*) for the final leg to New York City. **EG-C1** then commenced zigzagging northward for St. John's, in a line abreast 2 nm apart, in port to starboard order: *Halifax*, *Frontenac*, *Valleyfield*, *Giffard*, and *Edmundston* (across 8 nm). The ships were in a reduced state of readiness. In *Valleyfield*, during the Second Dog Watch (18:00 – 20:00), there was a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere, after a successful westbound crossing and in anticipation of arriving the next morning in St. John's. Included was an amateur entertainment hour by crew members and the playing of music records over the internal loudspeaker system.

At about 21:00, the northbound **EG-C1** briefly encountered the corvettes *Timmins* and *Agassiz*, followed by an RCAF Canso aircraft which passed astern of *Valleyfield*.

At 21:15 (02:15 GMT+2, 7 May), U-548 surfaced 42 nm SE of Cape Race. Fifteen minutes later, **EG-C1** stopped zigzagging, because any sudden appearances of small ice bergs (growlers) might cause sudden independent actions and risks of collisions

... and the radars of both *Frontenac* and *Valleyfield* were defective for detecting such growlers. At 13 knots, the five EG-C1 ships continued on course 001° towards St. John's. At about 22:30, the five ships in line-breast (4000 yards separation, almost 2 nm) entered mirror-like waters ... but did not resume zigzagging.

At 23:03, with a bright moon 45° above the horizon in the southern sky, the “*trimmed down*” surfaced U-548 was on a westerly (260°) course when Zimmermann, in his conning tower, saw the shadow of *Valleyfield* (which he believed was an isolated US destroyer) at a distance of 3 nm, approaching from the south. U-548 was to port of *Valleyfield*'s northerly course and Zimmermann was careful not to cross in front of the then distant *Valleyfield* and be illuminated by the moonlight. The still-surfaced U-boat altered course to 010° and at speed AK (highest emergency speed) closed the distance with the approaching target. At 23:18, Zimmermann was still not aware of the four corvettes steaming to port and starboard of *Valleyfield*, when he crash dived and declared action stations. All torpedo tubes were readied for attack, while he put U-548 hard-over to port and circled back southward towards *Valleyfield*, at periscope depth.

At 23:32, at a range of 1500 meters, Zimmermann fired a **G7s T5** “*Zaunkönig*” acoustic homing torpedo which would lock onto the loudest noise after travelling 400 meters. It was set to a running depth of 4 meters and was aimed at the *Valleyfield*'s approaching port-side bow. He then immediately put U-548 into a steep dive to starboard (south-west), to avoid being the target of his own homing torpedo and to evade the accompanying corvettes which could now be heard. (*Valleyfield* had made a routine course adjustment of a few degrees to starboard, resulting in the effective torpedo aim point changing from bow to mid-ship port-side.)

In *HMCS Valleyfield*, the Asdic (Sonar) operator paused the transmission to listen to an unusual quiet ticking sound at *Red 60* (60° to port). The sound was also heard on the bridge loudspeaker by the Officer of the Watch (OOW) Lieutenant Ian Tate who ordered the asdic operator to investigate from 250° to 290°. At 23:35, the operator had just started the asdic sweep, when the torpedo hit port side amidships and exploded into the No. 2 boiler-room. The frigate immediately broke in half and dark syrupy bunker oil from ruptured fuel tanks spread over the calm 32°F ice cold ocean surface. The forward section rolled to starboard and started to sink vertically while the after section began to slide under. Six minutes later the ship was gone. There had been no time for an orderly and effective abandon ship. Those personnel with and without lifejackets, who were on or near the upper deck would fling themselves into the ice-cold sea (which had a coating of sticky bunker oil) and attempt to swim to “*floaters nets*”, Carley floats, life buoys and any other flotsam which may have escaped the grip of their sinking ship.

When the torpedo slammed into *Valleyfield* at 23:35, she and the four corvettes were steaming northwards at about 13 knots in their 8 nm wide line-a-breast formation. However, prior to U-548 diving to periscope depth at 23:18, neither *Halifax*, *Gifford* nor *Edmundston* (each with operational radar) had detected a surfaced U-boat within their midst.

The Aftermath

When the torpedo slammed into *HMCS Valleyfield* at 23:35 ... about 2 miles to her starboard, the Captain of *Giffard* (LCdr C. Peterson) was in his cabin when he heard a distant explosion which was “*much sharper with a definite crack to it*” than experienced from torpedoes. The explosion was initially thought to be a depth charge launched by *Valleyfield*. When *Giffard*'s Captain got to the bridge, the Navigation Officer, Lieutenant William MacColl (OOW) and the Coxswain, Chief Petty Officer John Armitage (2nd OOW) with binoculars, had a blurry view of a high “*plume*” that seemed to come up from the water at the time of the explosion. Seconds later, there was black smoke “*which did not persist*” coming from her funnel and she started falling astern of station (confirmed by radar) until she could not be seen. *Giffard* attempted to contact *Valleyfield* by V/S (signal lamp) and R/T (HF voice).

At 23:43, *Giffard* altered course towards *Valleyfield*. At 23:45, the radar echo was becoming fainter. A calcium flare was sighted which was initially thought to be *Valleyfield* responding to *Giffard*'s V/S signals. *Giffard* continued towards the flare, while, until 23:54, trying to raise *Valleyfield* on V/S and R/T.

At 24:00, *Giffard* received an R/T signal from *Edmundston*, asking “*Are you in radar contact with Valleyfield*”. *Giffard*'s 00:01 reply to all ships was “*Close Me*”. At 00:08, *Giffard* followed up with “*VALLEYFIELD Torpedoed*”,

When *Giffard* arrived in the debris field, she slowly steamed passed the survivors, and continued with Asdic and Radar searches in an unsuccessful attempt to locate and sink the U-boat. At 00:10, about thirty-six minutes after they abandoned their ship into the ice cold ocean, *Giffard* returned and with *Edmundston*, started rescuing the remaining survivors. (A later *HMCS Giffard* report to Captain “*D*” Newfoundland stated “*The work of the rescue was made immeasurably difficult by the great quantities of oil which surrounded and covered the entire scene.*”) During this rescue effort, *Halifax*, *Frontenac* and later *Edmundston* continued the anti-submarine sweeps ... while U-548 again escaped for another day.

At 06:40 on 7 May 1944, *HMCS Giffard* entered St. John's harbour. Embarked were 38 survivors (including 14 stretcher cases) and the bodies of five casualties. Of *HMCS Valleyfield*'s complement of 163 (161 crew and 2 passengers), there were 125 casualties (13 officers and 112 seamen). The casualties included the squadron's senior officer Cdr John Byron RNR and *Valleyfield*'s captain LCdr Dermot Thomas English RCNR.