

## An Historical Vignette – Loss of the Empire Manor – 29 January 1944

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On 22 January 1944, a convoy of 60 merchant ships (HX-276), departed New York City and was bound for Liverpool. The escorts were two Flower-class corvettes *HMCS Kenogami* and *HMCS Shediac* and the Bangor-class minesweeper *HMCS Kenora*. On the second day, the Flower-class corvettes *HMCS The Pas* and *HMCS Battleford*, and the Algerine-class minesweeper *HMCS Wallaceburg* joined the convoy.

On the 28th, **HX-276** was approaching a rendezvous location, about 150 nautical miles SSE of Cape Race, for (1) receiving an additional 18 merchant ships (from Halifax and St John's); and (2) changing escorts for the Atlantic crossing. The weather was bad on the eastern edge of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland ... and a US Liberty ship, the *SS Edward Kavanagh* sheared to Port and collided into the British freighter *SS Empire Manor*. The *Empire Manor* was a two deck, six hold steamer which was built in 1943 for the UK Ministry of War Transport.

After the collision, the corvette *HMCS Kenogami* passed a line to the disabled freighter and began towing her. However, a fire then broke out in her cargo of various chemicals. The corvette went alongside and her sailors helped the merchant crew fight the flames for about an hour. With the fire raging out of control, the freighter's crew abandoned ship and were taken off by the corvette. Eighteen of the *Empire Manor* survivors (including the Master) were transferred to *HMCS Wallaceburg*.

Overnight, the burning freighter broke in half and the aft end sank. The next morning on the 29th, the bow portion was sunk by gunfire and depth charges from the minesweeper *Wallaceburg*. After the sinking, *Wallaceburg* received an encoded message from Halifax asking for the status of the gold bullion being carried by the *SS Empire Manor*.

Seventy gold ingots (29,050 troy ounces) of pure gold in wooden crates (1944 value \$983,343 USD, 2024 value \$70,097,650 USD) owned by the Bank of England, went down with the *Empire Manor*.

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During World War 2, the UK Admiralty's salvage vessels and operations were largely under the control of Risdon Beazley (and his company of the same name). After the war, Risdon Beazley Ltd. (RB) became a very successful international marine salvage company. \*

In 1953, Beazley concluded a salvage agreement with the Bank of England, whereby RB would receive 70% of the value of gold recovered from the wreck of the *SS Empire Manor*. The company's salvage vessel *SV Twyford* found the wreck at a depth of 320 feet, close to the location reported by *HMCS Wallaceburg*. An observation chamber with grab tools and divers were deployed. The bow end was upside-down and a hole was blasted through the double hull at the No. 1 hold. A great deal of useless cargo was removed but no lead or zinc was found, which was stored with the gold bullion. The 1953 operation was aborted.

In 1971, an agreement was reached whereby RB would receive 85% of the official value of any gold recovered. On the morning of 18 July 1973, the company's *SV Droxford* arrived above the wreck of the *SS Empire Manor*. Based upon the 1953 experience, the plan was to first cut out and remove a large portion of the double bottom of the upside-down forward hull, remove all cargo in the lower hold, cut out the separating decks, and remove all cargo in the search for the metals. In September, the *Droxford* made two trips to St John's Newfoundland to replenish supplies and the needed explosives. On 28 September, the first 8 gold ingots were brought to the surface.

On 14 October 1971, the *SV Droxford* arrived in St. John's with 61 recovered gold ingots. She departed after getting refueled and stored for the homeward journey. However, the salvage vessel did stop over the *SS Empire Manor*, and one last ingot was recovered by a diver.

\* *Risdon Beazley, Marine Salver*, Roy V. Martin & Lyle Craigie-Halkett, 2015, Brook House Books, UK