

The Search for the HMCS *Shawinigan*

By Sub-Lieutenant Gordon Laco

Ships have been lost off the coasts of Newfoundland since the first Europeans tentatively reached its rocky shores. The Norse trader Bjarni I-Ieriolfsson was the first to leave a written record, but in that record is the notation that they found the ‘keel of a wrecked ship’ when they arrived. Newfoundland’s coasts are beautiful and dangerous.

Periodically mankind adds to the dangers nature provides. Civilization’s wars have regularly throughout history reached Newfoundland—most recently was the Second World War. The largest number of Canadians killed in a sea action in that war was when the Sydney—Port aux Basques ferry SS *Caribou* was torpedoed and sunk in 1942. For Newfoundlanders, the war was not something that was happening far away to be read about in newspapers, it was happening at their doorsteps and it was not just volunteer soldiers who were paying with their lives, it was their own wives, children and parents.

The Royal Canadian Navy established a routine of patrolling the Maritime coasts, but could not prevent the loss of 15 merchant and naval vessels, sunk by enemy action by the time the war ended. One of the most tragic of those losses was the sinking of HMCS *Shawinigan* (Ki 36) with all hands just a few miles off Port aux Basques itself. The Navy has never forgotten; and has over the years made several attempts to fill in the many blanks in the story of what happened that terrible night.

Immediately after the war, Allied Intelligence officers began assembling and studying captured German military records. It was discovered that one of the few German U-boats to survive the war was U- 1228. When the signal was sent out in May of 1945 for all U- Boats at sea to surface, raise black flags and surrender, U-i 228 was off the coast of New England; she surrendered to the US Navy. While studying her logs and operational records, it was discovered that in November of 1944 she was concluding a patrol off the coast of Newfoundland and claimed to have sunk an Allied warship. A quick cross reference revealed that we did indeed lose a ship that particular night; at last the cause of the loss of HMCS *Shawinigan* included in the list of vanished ships, was now known.

The world returned to peace and several decades passed. In the early 1 990s the Canadian Hydrographic Service, the Federal organization responsible for surveying Canadian waters and producing navigation charts for mariners, turned its attention to the coast of Newfoundland between Port aux Basques and Burgeo. The Canadian Navy had a close interest in the work as seamen who navigate the waters, but also because developing accurate records of the characteristics of the sea bottom is an important part of any navy’s preparedness for coastal defense. In addition to the more traditional surveys, in 1996 an airborne survey was conducted using magnetometers which produced a record of bottom contours and magnetic anomalies; several appeared, a few of which caused people to recall *Shawinigan*.

U-1228’s Commanding Officer had made quite specific notations of where he was when he fired his single torpedo at *Shawinigan*; he noted the time of run, and the course his target was steering when he fired at her. One might think this would make it easy to pinpoint the location of the lost ship, but for one important detail. The torpedo U-1228 fired was of the acoustic

homing variety—what the Allies called during WWII a ‘Gnat’. These dreaded weapons were specifically designed for killing submarine hunters, which were often difficult to hit due to their smaller size and erratic courses. The Gnat followed our *Shawinigan* for several minutes, closed in on her despite her defensive zig-zag courses and struck her. The location could have been in a circle of many square kilometres. The discovery of magnetic anomalies on the seabed in the vicinity of where the ship was sunk made people think that perhaps one of them might be our lost ship.

In 1997 HMCS *Cormorant*, the Canadian Navy’s underwater research ship, was off the coast in the area of Port aux Basques and took the opportunity to investigate some of the more likely pinpoints identified by the magnetic survey. The search turned up nothing conclusive.

Two years ago, in 2008, as part of the Canadian Navy’s build up for its upcoming Centennial, the Naval Reserve’s planning committee identified the loss of *Shawinigan* as one of the events in the Navy’s history it wished to recognize and commemorate. Research was reopened and a request was sent to Maritime Forces Atlantic in Halifax for a renewed search. In the spring of 2009, the new HMCS *Shawinigan* MM704, a modern Kingston-Class warship, was tasked to use her state of the art side scan sonar to extend the search conducted earlier by *Cormorant*. Several interesting objects were discovered but nothing that might conclusively indicate that the final resting place of the first *Shawinigan* and her ship’s company had been found.

To have found the wreck would have been a deeply satisfying thing. The Canadian Navy has not forgotten any of its lost ships and the crews who formed their Ship’s Companies. Although we cannot yet mark a point on a chart and say ‘there she is,’ the Navy is going to do everything else in its power to help keep alive the memory of the young men who experienced the sudden death most feared in wartime by all seamen. We hope that everyone who can join us in Port aux Basques on 27 November will come and help us remember.