

[Page 27 - The Sinking of the 'Caribou' Ferry](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 10](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1975/3/31

Thomas Flemming, North Sydney: The first sinking that we knew of on this side of the Atlantic was in the Cabot Strait in May of '42, when a German submarine sank a cargo ship in the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Occasionally we were escorted by patrol boats of the Navy and they notified us on several occasions that we were being chased by submarines* We were ordered to change our course, take a zig-zag course. We did avoid them but they were in the strait long before the sinking of the Caribou • because fishermen saw them in the coves charging their batteries at night* We left North Sydney the previous trip and we were escorted by two naval vessels and we were chased from North Sydney to within 10 miles of Channel Head, Port aux Basques* That was the Sunday morning before the sinking. And that morning after we arrived in port a paper boat out of Comerbrook was sunk. M/S The total complement of passengers and crew amounted to 246. We had a lot of servicemen on that trip • American service personnel, Canadians on leave, soldiers going home before they went overseas • and the ordinary passenger list. We had the escort vessel but the escort vessels were slower really than the ships they were escorting. We had a perfect night. It was bright, which probably led to the sinking. Because the Caribou was a coal burner and you could see that smoke for miles and miles. I was in the wireless room with my assistant, William Hogan of Carbonara • we were working till 1:30. Then we decided we would have a sleep. Just as I was getting ready a tap came on the door and the captain came in. He asked me whether I saw the escort. I went out with him and we walked the bridge deck for probably half an hour. It was near 2:00 when I left him. We didn't see any sign of the escort. It seems I had just fallen asleep when I heard a thump • the explosion. I knew virtually it was right away. The ship rolled over to port and all the ceiling and wiring came down in the wireless room. We were all prepared as far as uniforms and lifesaving equipment. It was just a matter of to reach for it. The ship rolled over and settled back. Hogan and I came out on deck. The captain was there. He was trying to get his coat on. I tried to help him to put it on. That was the last I saw of the captain. I saw him go to the bridge. Hogan and I went to the boat deck • one deck below • to release a raft. It wouldn't release...there wasn't much we could do. I saw our Chief Engineer, Jim Pike • he passed in his shirt sleeves. And I saw our stewardess who asked me where Number One lifeboat was. Apparently it was blown away. That's all the crew I saw. The Second Officer was on that watch • James Prosper • he was never seen after the torpedo hit. Must have been blown off the bridge. By that time the ship was taking in water on that deck. It was almost up to my knees • the ship was sinking so fast we couldn't wait for this raft to release. I decided for myself I was going to jump overboard. She was going down and as she was going down she was steaming ahead just the same. Her engines were still working. The steam was just gradually leaking off. I jumped overboard. If I had waited any longer I wouldn't have a chance. I thought it was everybody for himself then, if you could get clear of the ship. I don't know what became of Hogan. He was lost. The ocean was cold but I didn't mind the cold. The excitement • I didn't feel the



cold. I suppose the shock made that much difference. I tried to get away from her as far as I could underwater. When I broke surface all that I could see a sort of fire. I thought it was the ship but the ship was gone. It might have been an explosion. It could have Cape Breton's Maga2ine/27