

The Final Mission: The Story of the U-190



THE FINAL MISSION : THE STORY OF THE U-190

In the dying days of the Nazi regime, German U-boats fight to the end.

On April 16th, 1945, the *U-190* sinks the minesweeper HMCS *Esquimalt*, the last Canadian warship lost in the Second World War. The survivors endure six hours in the frigid water before being rescued; only twenty-seven of the minesweeper's seventy-one crewmembers will survive.

On May 11, the *U-190* receives a transmission from headquarters: each U-boat must surrender to Allied forces. Two Canadian escort vessels are transferred from a convoy with orders to meet and board the *U-190*. The U-boat is now a prize of war and her crew is made prisoner.

During the summer of 1945, the *U-190*, now property of the Canadian Navy, sets out on an exhibition tour which takes her to the main ports on the St. Lawrence River. The submarine

then travels to Trois-Rivières, Quebec City, Gaspé, Pictou, Sydney and each time, her presence attracts thousands of onlookers.

The Canadian Navy decides to put an end to the *U-190*'s career on October 21, 1947. The U-boat is towed to the spot where it had sunk the HMCS *Esquimalt*. For the RCN, the sinking of the *U-190* was the final act of a drama which marked the end of enemy incursions into the country, and a symbolic way to end the war.

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

BEFORE THE SCREENING: EXPLAIN TO THE STUDENTS THE CONTEXT OF THE FILM

❶ **The Battle of the Atlantic:** The Battle of the Atlantic was the most crucial confrontation of the war. From the beginning of the Second World War, the Atlantic supply route from North America to the United Kingdom was threatened. The Germans, aware that seaborne commerce was essential to Britain's survival, determined from the start to cut the sea routes with all the means at their

disposal. German submarines (U-boats) were the most effective and deadly arm of the navy.

○ Canada's role in the Battle of the Atlantic was significant. The most important achievement of the Atlantic war was the 25,343 merchant ship voyages made from North American to British ports under the protection of Canadian forces.

○ Canadian warships and aircraft sank, or shared in the destruction of fifty U-boats.

○ Beginning the war with a mere thirteen vessels and 3,500 personnel, the Royal Canadian Navy grew to become the third largest of the allied navies during this period. At war's end in 1945 the RCN comprised 373 fighting ships and over 110,000 members.

○ During the war, more than 2,000 members of the RCN were killed, the vast majority in the Battle of the Atlantic.

❷ **The Battle of the St. Lawrence:** In 1942, U-boats sailed up the St. Lawrence Seaway and inflicted heavy losses to merchant and military vessels. Three years after the beginning of the war,

Canadians suddenly realized that their shores had become a new theatre of operations.

○ The first enemy attack upon shipping in the St. Lawrence River took place on 11 May, 1942, when the freighter *Nicoya* was sunk by the *U-553*. Less than two hours later, the same U-boat hunted down and torpedoed the Dutch freighter *Leto*.

○ The *U-132* sank three freighters off the Gaspé coast on July 6 and damaged another on July 20.

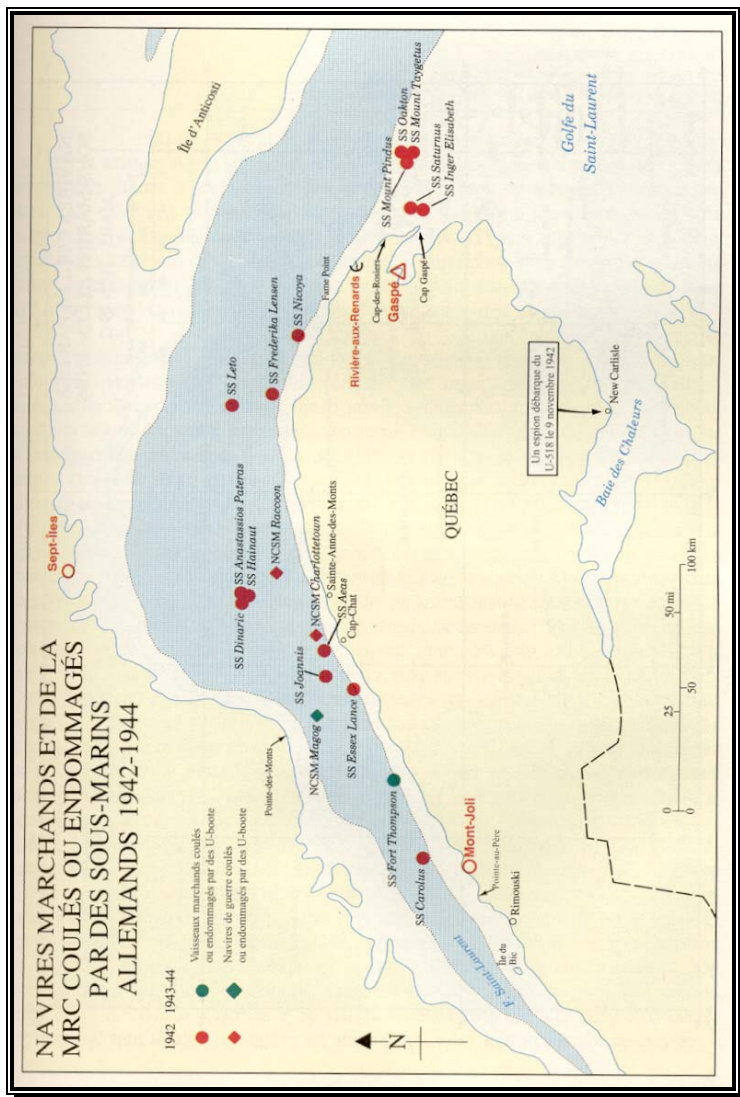
○ On September 7, was torpedoed HMCS *Raccoon* and its entire crew of thirty-seven were lost in an instant. The same day, three freighters were sunk near Gaspé.

○ In September, the *U-517* entered the St. Lawrence estuary, where it sank nine vessels and damaged another over a two-week period.

○ Faced with a rising toll on lives and shipping, the Canadian government closed the St. Lawrence to all trans-Atlantic shipping on September 9, 1942.

○ The last loss of the 1942 season was the largest, and the most tragic. It was the Sydney to Port aux Basques ferry *Caribou*, which was sunk by *U-69* in Cabot Strait in the early morning of October 14, 1942. Of the 257 men, women and children aboard, 125 perished.

○ During the summer and fall of 1942, this wave of attacks sank twenty-one ships in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and four others in the vicinity, causing the loss of hundreds of lives (see map).



POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- With the entire class, review the high points of the film.
- Ask the students about their perception on the circumstances surrounding the end of the U-boats war and the sinking of the *Esquimalt*.



- Do you feel any sympathy for German submariners?



- Do you think the submarine's presence off Halifax, barely three weeks before the end of the conflict, had a strategic value?
- Can we say all German soldiers during the Second World War were Nazis? Should one make a distinction between political and military ideologies?
- Do you believe the RCN was right to sink the *U-190* instead of being put in a museum the way the Americans would do it?
- Ask the students to give their opinions on these statements by, Werner Hirschmann

Deserters in general, whether in navy, army or air force, were usually executed. That happened during the war and it happened at the end of the war. And I personally do not have any problem with that..

We in the Navy always tried to fight a very clean war... and I think that has been acknowledged in general. But that really was the case, so it did not at any time really bother my own conscience what I did, and of course I'm being blamed today for helping the Nazis win or lose the war, but I never looked at that from that point of view. All I ever did during the war was carry out my profession.

Concerning the Holocaust:

We simply couldn't believe it when we saw those pictures and for us it was propaganda. It didn't take too long and we had to accept that, yes, these were pictures of reality. And we really were in a state of shock because we could not have ever anticipated that something like that would be done on Germany's behalf. We did not understand that, it was just beyond us. And of course we were only part of that same population who never ever knew about it until these camps were discovered. we had the feeling that had this ever become known in Germany, there would have been a revolution.

➤ Research topics:

- Canada's role in the Battle of the Atlantic
- The Battle of the St. Lawrence
- Life aboard U-boats
- Life of German prisoners in Canadian prison camps

OTHER RESOURCES

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