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THE U-BOAT BATTLES OF BELL ISLAND



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The U-Boat Battles of Bell Island

The WWII Allied victory in the Battle of the Atlantic was hard-won. The U-boat attacks at Newfoundland's Bell Island took place during the height of the Atlantic campaign – from mid 1940 to the end of 1943 – before the tide turned on the Germans. In this 'tonnage' war the deadly U-boat wolf packs had just one mission – sink as many merchant ships as possible.

Text by Robert Osborne

Just knowing that Vikings settled here a thousand years ago and the first fishermen from Europe began arriving in the 1500s, adds to the sense of history, to the 'mists of time' that cloak this eastern most extremity of Atlantic Canada. It's a feeling I get whenever I visit Newfoundland and Labrador – like now – enjoying a sunny June day aboard the *Ocean Quest* as skipper Bill Flaherty navigates across Conception Bay toward Bell Island.

I'm on my way to dive what have become widely known as the 'Bell Island wrecks'. These are not artificial reefs put down safely and carefully for divers to enjoy. It was a catastrophic event – World War II – and the deadly effect of German U-boats that sealed the fate of these ships and for me this history alters everything about the dive experience that lies ahead. It's a gripping story that Bill is eager to relate as we motor along.

Hollywood Material

It began September 4, 1942 – on a moonless night – as *U-513* slipped undetected into the convoy anchorage in Conception Bay. How it managed this is reminiscent of a Hollywood war movie. The stealthy submarine tucked itself under the stern of the *SS Evelyn B* and followed her into the sheltered bay where ships came to take on iron ore from the Bell Island mines. This cargo – used to make steel to fight the Nazis – was crucial to the Allied war effort,

which the Germans wanted to obstruct at all costs. And so it was that Captain Rolf Rugeberg decided on a daylight attack for best effect and silently settled his U-boat on the bottom of the bay – to wait for morning.

When he surfaced, Rugeberg first took aim at the *SS Lord Strathcona* and fired. But his crew had failed to arm the two torpedoes so they soon sank harmlessly to the bottom. By this time the sub had been spotted by crew of the same ship that had unwittingly given it access to the protected harbour. Quickly, the *Evelyn B* opened fired with its deck gun, forcing *U-513* to dive. At depth the sub selected another target, the *SS Saganaga*. This time there were no mistakes. It fired once, then twice. Both torpedoes ripped into the ore-laden ship, which sank rapidly.

Now all the ships tried frantically to get underway and out of the sights of the deadly U-boat. Rugeberg was focused on selecting his next victim and maneuvering his sub into position but in the chaos of the battle his target ship, the *SS Lord Strathcona*, swung around and hit the U-boat's conning tower. The impact caused some damage to *U-513*, forcing it to the bottom, but the captain quickly used his stern tubes to fire off two torpedoes, both hitting their mark. Like the *Saganaga*, the *Lord Strathcona* was brimming with ore and quickly sank.

With two ships down, the water was teeming with injured sailors; the air filled with their cries. Poorly



1. The *SS Rose Castle*. 2. The free French ship *PLM-27*. 3. Locals pose with torpedo remains on the shore of Bell Island, Newfoundland, where fierce U-boat battles took place during the height of WWII's Battle of the Atlantic. 4. The *U-518* pictured under aerial attack. She sank the *SS Rose Castle* and the *PLM-27* off Bell Island, Newfoundland. 5. Author Robert Osborne checks out deck gun on the wreck of the *SS Saganaga*. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 6. Superstructure of the *PLM-27*. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 7. Cold water diving in Newfoundland offers wrecks, reefs and the unusual, such as whalebone graveyards and icebergs. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 8. The *Ocean Quest* dive boat at anchor next to 'The Clapper', a rock pinnacle off the south coast of Bell Island, location of superb wreck diving near St. John's, Newfoundland. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 9. Diver Robert Osborne examines a rusting machine gun on the sunken *SS Saganaga*. Excellent visibility in Conception Bay allows impressive wide-angle perspectives of the big ore carriers. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 10. The *U-513* at dockside. She sank the *SS Saganaga* and the *SS Lord Strathcona* off Bell Island, Newfoundland in 1942. 11. The *SS Lord Strathcona*. 12. The *SS Saganaga*.



positioned shore guns proved ineffective in the action and as ships attempted to flee the bay and the sub's torpedoes, small boats were launching from Bell Island to rescue survivors. In all the confusion, *U-513* slipped out into the Atlantic where her crew repaired the damaged conning tower so they could continue on their North Atlantic patrol.

A Site To Behold

The cost of those attacks in men and materiel was high. Twenty-nine sailors died – all from the *Saganaga*. Crew of the *Lord Strathcona*, with some warning, had been able to abandon their ship before torpedoes tore open her hull. The ships themselves, broken and discarded like a child's toys, remain on the seabed as if waiting to be reclaimed. And I'm about to dive down and explore them.

My guide is Debbie Stanley, one of the co-owners of Ocean Quest—a dive lodge on Conception Bay that specializes in diving these waters. She and her husband, Rick, have become unofficial custodians of the wrecks, which remain unprotected by government decree, federal or otherwise. On these charters all divers are cautioned politely, but firmly, to “take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but bubbles.” A familiar refrain in the diving fraternity, perhaps, but especially relevant here; this site is a war grave. Many men died in this action and for Rick and Debbie the fight continues to have the wrecks declared National Historic Monuments, to put an end to the casual pillaging. “Every time I swim past an ammo box on the deck, I see a few more bullets missing,” Rick tells me. “And the brass plaque on the lifeboat was prised off last year.”

Deb and I gear up. We drop over the side and down the mooring line toward the *SS Lord Strathcona*, of Canadian registry, and sizeable at 7,335 tons and over 400 feet (122m). She rests between 90 and 125 feet (28-38m) and as we near the structure my first thought is that I'm approaching a coral reef. Absurd, surely, but on this sunny day a penetrating sun dapples the ship with bands of light that ignite its coat of gold, pink, orange and purple sea anemones. This fauna blankets much of the superstructure creating the appearance of a wreck covered with coral. To this surreal scene, add the visibility typical of a coral reef destination. As I hover just above what would have been the upper deck, I'm able to see half way to her stern; remember she's 400 feet (122m) long. So I'm guessing the vis – minimally – is 100 feet (30m) plus.

Deb signals for us to descend a few more feet where I'm introduced to one of the resident lumpfish (*Cyclopterus lumpus*). Now, there may be uglier fish in the ocean but frankly I've yet to see them.

Think 'Hunchback of Notre Dame'... at about two feet (0.6m) in length, this...well, lump of a fish, looks as if it's survived a seriously disfiguring accident at some point in its life. But then Debbie pans her light across the creature and, figuratively speaking, the beast transforms into a beauty of dazzling pinks and greens. Something about ugly ducklings... fairy tales coming true... springs to mind. Then we're off to the stern.

Did I Mention It's Cool?

By the way, the water is brisk. On second thought, this isn't the right adjective. Bone-numbing, mind-boggling, take-your-breath-away cold is more apt. The average temperature today is around 39°F (4°C). Later, I'll find it can get even colder. Deep in the *SS Rose Castle* I'll experience temperatures as low as 36°F (2°C). Some of the tech divers will report 28°F (-2°C) deep in the holds where the water doesn't move. Dry suits and serious thermal undergarments are de rigueur. Mine just doesn't cut it, or maybe I'm just a wuss, but about 30 minutes is my maximum bottom time today. Eventually, someone takes pity on me and lends me a top manufactured by Fourth Element. Works like a charm and I'm toasty for the rest of the week. Here in Conception Bay, the 'bottom' line is that the temperature is a price you pay for sensational diving, and for the record, I'd pay again in a heartbeat.

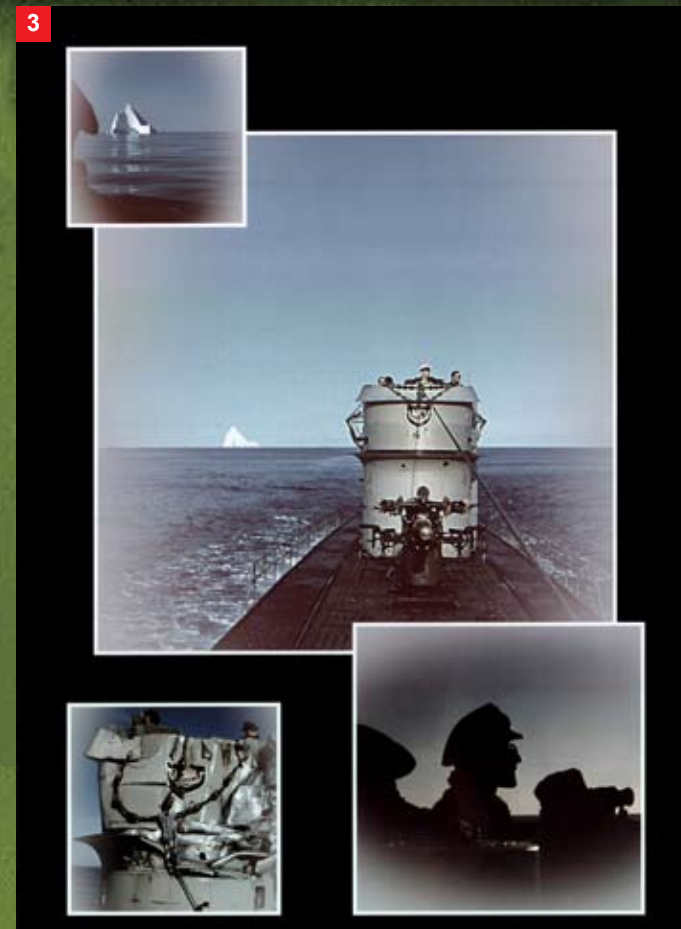
Fifteen minutes into the dive and Debbie has taken me to the stern location of an old 4.7-inch deck gun covered in multi-hued sea life, but still unmistakably a weapon. We circle the gun a couple of times and head back to the ascent line. On the way I'm shown a discarded machine gun on the deck but I'm not too keen to linger; my body is starting to get really cold. After an hour's surface interval, I'm champing at the bit to go down again for a second dive on the *Lord Strathcona*. This time we head straight for the bow.



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1. The *Ocean Quest* dive charter boat off Bell Island. The company offers diving, whale watching, kayaking and land-based adventures in Newfoundland-Labrador. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 2. Robert Osborne explores the hold of the *SS Saganaga* in Conception Bay, near the Newfoundland capitol of St. John's. Photo: © Debbie Stanley 3. This collage of photos that show the *U-513*, were in the personal collection of the U-boat's captain, Rolf Rugeberg, whose daughter Marita and husband Barry visited Newfoundland this July, during which time she donated some of her father's wartime papers to the Bell Island Museum. The pictures show the submarine in the iceberg-strewn waters off Newfoundland during WWII; the U-boat's damaged conning tower caused during the Bell Island attack, and a silhouette of Captain Rugeberg during a North Atlantic patrol. Photos: Courtesy Marita (Rugeberg) Collins. 4. Diver Dan Wright navigates through superstructure of the Free French ship *PLM-27*, off Bell Island. Photo: © Polina Reznikov 5. A diver is dwarfed by the massive propeller of the *PLM-27*. The rudder is at left. The *PLM-27* was blown in two by a torpedo. Photo: © Debbie Stanley



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I get photographed doing my best 'I'm the king of the world' imitation, poke my head into the room where an old Marconi radio is still attached to the wall and spend a few minutes playing with a flat fish.

As we near the ascent line we encounter a large jellyfish called a Lion's Mane. With their venomous sting they're usually given a wide berth. But this one has drifted into the wreck and become entangled so we swim in for a closer look. Moments later I'm getting acquainted with another local denizen – the Ocean Pout – which bears an uncanny resemblance to Mick Jagger or perhaps it's Steve Tyler?

As we head back into port – stuffing our faces with homemade moose meat stew to warm up – we pass the sheer cliffs of Bell Island, weave among tankers anchored in the bay, and as the sun beats down I'm beginning to sense that this is going to be a very special week of diving.

The following morning brings more blue sky and calm seas. We head out to explore a couple of different wrecks: the *SS Saganaga* in the afternoon and before it the shallowest of the four wrecks, *PLM-27*, a Free French ship I'm told was caught in the second round of U-boat attacks that Bill recounts as we head out.

The Second Attack

It was November 2, 1942; just two months after the first U-boat attack, and if people thought that incident was some kind of anomaly they were sadly mistaken. This time it was *U-518* slipping quietly into the bay. To avoid detection, she hugged the cliffs of the mainland so closely that her bridge crew reported seeing cars driving along the roads of the mainland. In contrast to his *U-513* comrade, Captain Friedrich Wissmann decided on a night attack. His first torpedo was fired at a coal boat moored near the Scotia Pier. He missed the boat and got the pier instead – causing substantial damage. Wissmann's second two shots would not go astray.

Lining up on the *SS Rose Castle*, he fired two torpedoes in quick succession. Both found their marks – one in the vessel's stern, the other her bow. The *Rose Castle* went down in minutes and the grim toll of the surprise attack amounted to 28 of 43 crewmen dead.

But *U-518* wasn't finished. The *PLM-27* (Paris, Lyon, Marseilles) moored near the *Rose Castle* fired flares to help survivors from the torpedoed ship and in doing so allowed the U-boat to take perfect aim on her now illuminated form. *PLM-27* took a torpedo dead amidships, splitting her almost perfectly in two and sinking her in a matter of seconds. Twelve men died.

This time it was snowing and cold when the attacks took place. There were no rescue boats in the area. Now 86, Gordon Hardy, survived the attack on the *Rose Castle* and decades later paints a picture of that night as

a Dante-esque Hell. He remembers being in his bunk amidships when the first torpedo struck. He jumped into the frigid water in his underwear just as the second torpedo hit. He spent hours clinging to a raft listening to the screams of other men in the nearby dark. The cold was perishing and he recalls seeing some men die even as they were being pulled from the water. As before, the U-boat slipped out of the bay and into the Atlantic amid all the confusion of the assault.

A horrifying story, I think, and I'm about to get a first person feel for just how horrifying it truly was. Deb and I suit up and quickly descend to the wreck of the *PLM-27*. As with the other wrecks, *PLM-27* sits upright on the bottom. She's relatively shallow in 60 to 80 feet (18-24m). After a quick look at the propeller we work our way forward to midships where Debbie swims through a gap in the side of the ship, stops, and gestures for me to look around. At first I'm puzzled. Look at what, I wonder? I'm floating in the middle of a large opening in the side of the ship. Then it dawns on me. This gaping hole was blown in the side of the ship by a torpedo. I look more closely and start to notice details. The two-inch steel hull is jagged and peeled back like so much aluminum foil. photo I'm awestruck by the scale of the destruction. To be in close proximity of an explosion capable of ripping a ship open like it's made of cardboard would have been terrifying. How anyone lived through this explosion is beyond my comprehension. I feel a deep sadness for the sailors who died here, some in the deadly cold water after eluding the certain death of the torpedo explosions. Little wonder Deb and Rick are pushing so hard to have the wrecks protected. I understand it as a debt owed the men who gave their lives for the generations that have followed.

A sober feeling hangs over me the rest of the day. I enjoy exploring the wreck of the *SS Saganaga*, but I can't get the image of that torpedo hole out of my mind and it becomes more vivid still when I see the *Saganaga's* anchor. This massive piece of iron, weighing as much as a couple of tons, was blown nearly 300 feet from the ship's bow when the high explosive torpedo delivered its death and destruction.

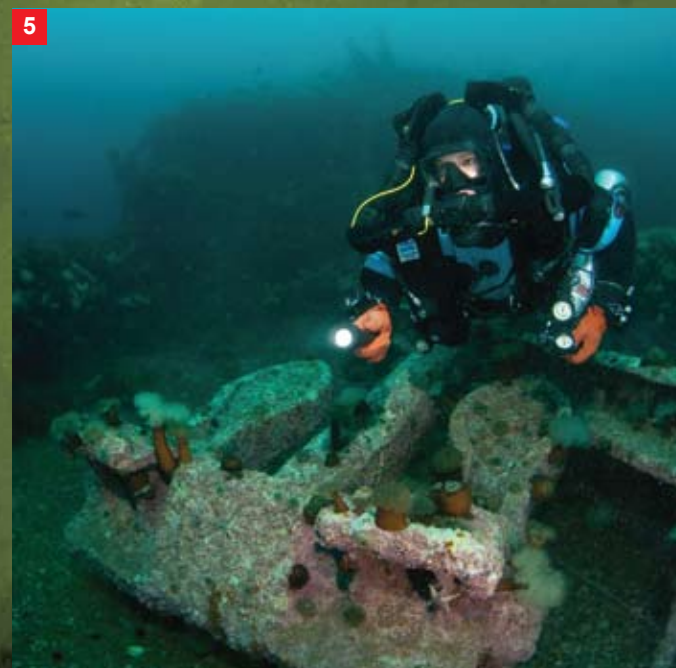
Day three and we're exploring the deepest and most intact Bell Island wreck – the *SS Rose Castle*. In fact, it's eerie swimming among the upright masts and cranes that look almost serviceable. She's the coldest dive at well over 110 feet (34m) to the deck, and briefest, with bottom time limited for recreational divers. But we reach the massive anemone-covered stern gun whose once threatening appearance now resembles a sponge toy loaded with Nerf ball ammo.

By the end of the week I've managed to put in four days of wreck diving and I'm struck by three thoughts:

First, that anything I thought I knew about diving in Newfoundland and Labrador was wrong. I'd imagined the water to be dark and cold – with low visibility and



1. Correspondent Robert Osborne approaches bow of the *PLM-27*. Photo: © Debbie Stanley
2. Cargo hold and winching gear on the *SS Saganaga*. Photo: © Debbie Stanley
3. Ammo box on deck of the *Saganaga* recalls the wartime demise of this ship. Photo: © George Sharrard
4. Stern area of the *PLM-27* bears witness to her violent end. Photo: © George Sharrard
5. Diver Dan Wright beside *SS Saganaga's* anchor, catapulted to its midship location from the bow by the explosive force of the torpedo.
6. Encrusted machinery has turned the torpedoed *PLM-27* into a living reef off Bell Island, Newfoundland. Photos 5 and 6: © Polina Reznikov



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not much to see anyway. I was right about the cold, dead wrong about everything else. There's plenty to explore and it's in clear view. I've dived tropical waters that would be put to shame by the stunning visibility and rich life of Conception Bay.

Second, once again 'the Rock' has delivered. The shipwreck diving is some of the best, revealing a chapter in the island's wartime history that has touched me profoundly.

My third and final thought is for the men who endured those two nights back in 1942. I'm left with a deep respect for all those who lived and died in the U-boat battles of Bell Island. For information and bookings go to: www.oceanquestadventures.com 🍁

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