

**“They that go down to the sea in ships”**

***The Life and Times of Captain Morris O’Hara (Isaacs Harbour, NS),  
Master of Lady Nelson during the Second World War***

Psalm 107:23-24 King James Version (KJV):

“They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;  
These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.”

By Gerry Madigan

22 July 2018

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## 1. Introduction

The Second World War was truly the story of the home front. Many young Canadian men and woman from all walks of life, from cities, towns, and hamlets, joined in the fight against fascism. These young people all stood together, shoulder to shoulder in a great enterprise that defeated an ideology that threatened the peace and liberty of us all. It took the Second World War to do so.

Then as now, some do not appreciate that the world of the 1930s was quickly sinking towards an abyss of human depravity. Another war to end all wars was on the horizon, in which our values, life and liberty held little currency. Something had to be done. This is a story of a generation that fought and died in doing something about it. That should not be forgotten!

2018 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada's participation in the Italian Campaign during the Second World War. The first step was the invasion of Sicily on 10 July, that was subsequently followed by the invasion of Italy proper in September 1943. All of Canada's armed forces participated; army, navy and air force foreshadowing the invasion of Northwest Europe later, on D-Day, 6 June 1944. In all, 92,757 Canadian soldiers served in the Italian theatre. Sadly, a quarter of these became casualties; 5,764 lost their lives.<sup>1</sup>

There are many stories to choose from and tell in leading to the Italian Campaign. This is one of a local boy and a ship he came to command during the Second World War. Once again it began with a newspaper clipping sent to me by Norma Cooke of Isaac's Harbour. It languished amongst the many projects that sat on my desk far too long. I was pleasantly surprised as it turned out to be both interesting and enlightening.

Unlike other stories, this one had a plethora of textual and photographic material to draw upon. Surprisingly, this story isn't one of youthful exuberance in joining up. It was the story of a mature and dedicated man behind the scenes of action and world events. Many young Canadians paid a terrible price during the war. One man came to care for Canadian youth in an unexpected way. It's the story of Captain Morris Osbourne O'Hara and the Canadian National Steamship (CNS), Lady Nelson.

Captain Morris Osborne O'Hara was a fourth-generation mariner, borne to John Wilt O'Hara (Master Mariner) and mother Mary Anne (nee Burke) at Isaac's Harbour, NS in 1893. Surprisingly Morris's birth was only declared, registered and notarized in Halifax

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<sup>1</sup> Canada, Canadian War Museum, Operations – The Sicilian and Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945, 2018

Source:

[https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/operations/sicilianitalian\\_e.shtml](https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/operations/sicilianitalian_e.shtml)

Accessed: 12 Jun 2018

on 25 January 1932 by one Guy Meadows Mitchell, Notary. His uncle, Henry Marshall O'Hara, witnessed his attestation.<sup>2</sup>



Captain Morris O'Hara, O.B.E.

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<sup>2</sup>Nova Scotia, Public Archives, Historical Vital Statistics, Record of Birth, **Morris Osborne O'Hara, born 1893 in Isaacs Harbour, Guysborough County**, Page: 71300675

Source: <https://www.novascotiagenealogy.com/ItemView.aspx?ImageFile=1904-71300675&Event=birth&ID=170869>

Accessed: 1 June 2018

From Clipping Halifax Chronicle Herald, 18 March 1950

It may seem odd that Morris's birth was only registered long after the fact. We do not know the reasons, but the death of his father, Wilt may explain the oversight. John Wilt O'Hara died before Morris was born. It may have distracted all from the legal requirements in the registration of his birth at the time.

It seemed only natural though that Morris would follow in his father's footsteps in a life tied to the sea. It was a part of his own legacy that had deep roots. First, it was geography. Isaac's Harbour lies on Atlantic Canada's east coast where the sea gets into your blood at an early age.

Tradition may also have had something to do with it. Three generations of Morris's family were master mariners on his father's line alone. It was also a matter of history too. One of his great grandfathers fought with Nelson at Trafalgar and was on the ship that transported Napoleon into exile.<sup>3</sup>

His paternal great grandfather had once taken a great leap of faith by emigrating to Canada and leaving Ireland behind. He did it in style too. He built and sailed his own new 60-foot schooner that transported all his immediate family to Canada.<sup>4</sup> Such as it was, Morris's family line and livelihood were tied inexorably to the sea and his roots thus deeply seated.

How could it be otherwise? He was the son of a master mariner, his brothers were all sea farers, whose careers and history all looked to the past while looking at their future. Their ancestors; grandfathers and great-grandfathers were all seafarers and deep-sea captains as they all were.<sup>5</sup> No one can escape such a legacy or the influence of family tradition. The sea's allure was all too great!

Captain O'Hara ultimately followed in his father's footsteps, having a very distinguished career, while serving more than 33 years at sea. Notably, 26 of the 33 years were spent with the Canadian National Steamship Line (CNS). Captain O'Hara was very modest concerning his accomplishments in the news accounts of his deeds. He served in the Merchant Navy during the First World War and came back to serve once again in the

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Miller, **True Son of the Sea- Fourth Generation of Nova Scotia Family of Skippers**, The Halifax Chronicle Herald, 18 March 1950

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Miller, 1950

<sup>5</sup> Ibid Miller, 1950

Second.<sup>6</sup> He rose up through the ranks to finally assume Command of Lady Nelson.<sup>7</sup> His service there was marked with great distinction. It's an epic story, one worthy of Hollywood in telling. And so, let the story begin.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid Miller, 1950; and  
Library and Archives Canada, Royal Canadian Navy, 1910-1941 – Service Files Ledger Sheets, O'Hara, Morris Osborne, item 974 (Nauticapedia),

<http://nauticapedia.ca/dbase/Query/Biolist3.php?&name=O'Hara, Morris Osborne&id=50511&Page=1&input=O'Hara, Morris>

Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>7</sup> Ibid Miller, 1950

## 2. The Lady Boats

Captain O'Hara's story begins with his service aboard the Lady Boats. These ships were built for the Canadian National Steamship (CNS) line in the 1920s.

There were five famous "Lady" ships, which began sailing from Canada to the West Indies. The Lady Nelson was first to leave Halifax December 12, 1928, on this service. She was the fleet's flagship.



Library and Archives Canada, Canadian National Steamship "Lady Nelson" – Officers.; Accession number 1989-455 NPC

The Lady Ships were designed to carry cargo and passengers. They were the pleasure cruisers of the day outfitted with great opulence to attract paying passengers. But it would always be a tough go for them, as the ships were built and put into service just as the Great Depression hit Canada.

There were two lines for the fleet in the provision of service to the West Indies. The western line made its home port at Montreal and the eastern line at Halifax. "Western"

and “Eastern” do not mark the dispositions of the ships at their home ports in Canada. They reflect a designation of the routes taken by the fleet through the Caribbean.

The western route departing from Montreal ventured down the St Lawrence and then turned in the Gulf toward the Strait of Canso. Their path took the boats through the Strait onto the broad Atlantic in their journey to the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> These ships would have been familiar sights as they passed through the Strait of Canso whose passage is now limited by the Causeway and Canal.

The Lady Nelson was based in Halifax on the Eastern Service. She found herself in interesting times. The late 1920s and early 1930s were periods of intense interest in Eastern Canada. The Lady Boats were very much involved in sweeping changes affecting both the port and city of Halifax.

Halifax began to re-assert and revitalize itself as a principal port. It experienced a cultural boom and by 1926, had its own radio station concentrating on local interests. The city even considered building an airport.<sup>9</sup> The Lady Boats were part of the foundation of this progress as it brought with it commerce and pleasure cruisers.

But more importantly Canada and Nova Scotia became aware of the emerging danger of Germany as a threat to North American security. Our attention was drawn to that fact in 1934 when major developments were contemplated. The true threat was realized by the visit of the German airship, Hindenburg.

Hindenburg was on its way to New York, there was no stop over in Halifax, but the airship cruised over the harbour and city photographing the dockyard and all the city's fortifications. This simple fly-by demonstrated that better means of defence, transportation and communication were required.<sup>10</sup>

In the meantime, however, with war looming on the horizon, the Lady Ships continued their service between Canada and the Islands of the West Indies. One of their ports of call, and one that would hold special interest for the crew of Lady Nelson, was Castries at St. Lucia. It was a favoured port for all the Lady Boats. The Lady Boats were easily accommodated and were able to lie comfortably along side its dock.

Port Castries was an easy spot to load and discharge cargo because of its modern facilities. St Lucia was a product of bygone days though. Castries was once used principally as a coaling station.<sup>11</sup> It was here where ships on their way to and from southern latitudes were fueled. So, it was well built and maintained. It became a favoured port for crew rest and recreation.

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<sup>8</sup> Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, M.B.E., **The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada's West Indies Merchant Fleet**, Canadian Marine Transportation Centre, Dalhousie University, 1980, pg. 23

<sup>9</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 39

<sup>10</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 39

<sup>11</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 33

The Lady Nelson, and her sisters, Lady Drake, Lady Hawkins, Lady Somers and Lady Rodney, became Canadian goodwill ambassadors to the Caribbean Islands while hauling both freight and passengers to and from there. The Lady Ships were a “symbol of the ties that existed between the mainland countries and the islands they touched.”<sup>12</sup>



SS Lady Rodney in St. John's, NF in May 1943. In peacetime, this ship sailed the Caribbean with 130 passengers and cargo, during the war she was converted to carry 500 soldiers. Photo taken from HMCS WASAGA. Roger Litwiller Collection, courtesy Ross Milligan, RCNR. (RTL-REM165)

They weren't big ships as far as tonnage goes, built by the Cammell Laird & Co., at Birkenhead, England. Lady Nelson had a gross tonnage of 7970 tons. She carried 132 first, 32 second and 53 third class passengers plus 48 free roaming 'deckers'.

Lady Hawkins and Lady Drake were built to this standard while the remaining two, the Lady Rodney and Somers carried a total of 125 first class passengers only. These latter boats were slightly over 8000 tons, but all were considered sister ships as outwardly, they had the same design made by A. T. Wall & Co., of Liverpool. Further their interiors never differed. They closely resembled one another. And they were all sisters in name too, being christened after the wives of five famous British Admirals for their exploits in the Caribbean.<sup>13</sup>

All five liners remained in the Canadian National Steamship (CNS) service for a year after the outbreak of the Second World War. Things changed in 1940. In October of that year, Lady Somers was turned over to the British Admiralty for use as an auxiliary unit. Sadly, less than a year later, she was torpedoed and sunk by enemy action.

She was amongst three Lady Boats that were eventually lost during the war including Lady Hawkins, and Lady Drake. All went to the bottom, sunk by enemy action at various

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Sankoff, Canadian **National Steamships 1946-1958**, The Scanner – The Monthly News Bulletin of the Toronto Marine Historical Society, v. 1, n. 2 (May 1968)  
Source: [www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/Documents/Scanner/01/02/default.asp?ID=c004](http://www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/Documents/Scanner/01/02/default.asp?ID=c004)  
Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>13</sup> Ibid Fred Sankoff, 1968



points during the Second World War. The Lady Hawkins was lost in January 1942 while still in company service, sunk off the coast of Bermuda with her master, Captain. H. O. Giffin, lost along with the ship. Within six months of Lady Hawkins' loss, the CNS service to the Caribbean was finally abandoned for the duration of the war.<sup>14</sup>

Later in March 1942, the Lady Nelson was torpedoed in the Harbour of Castries, St. Lucia. Following only a short two months later, the Lady Drake was sunk and lost too. Lady Drake was torpedoed a mere one day's travel from Bermuda.

The Lady Ships were fully engaged in the war. Lady Rodney, the last remaining liner of the fleet still in CNS service, was eventually taken over by the Department of National Defence in June 1942. It served a useful and vital purpose as a troopship between Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador.<sup>15</sup>

It might seem odd to the modern reader, but a posting to Newfoundland and Labrador was indeed consider as an "overseas posting". Newfoundland then was not yet a Canadian province. Newfoundland would only become one 31 March 1949, after a long and heated referendum, with Joey Smallwood as its Premier.<sup>16</sup>



*SS Lady Rodney in St. John's, NF in May 1943. In peacetime, this ship sailed the Caribbean with 130 passengers and cargo, during the war she was converted to carry 500 soldiers. Photo taken from HMCS WASAGA. Roger Litwiller Collection, courtesy Ross Milligan, RCNR. (RTL-REM165)*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid Fred Sankoff, 1968

<sup>15</sup> Ibid Fred Sankoff, 1968

<sup>16</sup> Melvin Baker, **The Tenth Province: Newfoundland joins Canada, 1949**, (originally in) *Horizon*, vol. 10, Number 111 (1987), 2641-67.

Source: <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~melbaker/confederation1949.htm>

Accessed: 3 June 2018

In the meantime, Lady Nelson was raised from the bottom and towed to Mobile, Alabama 11 May 1942. She was converted for other duty. In the process of this conversion, she was stripped of her stately cabins that made room for hospital wards and medical laboratories. Lady Nelson was relaunched once again April 1943, but this time as a hospital ship. Her crew now included a group of 70 Canadian Medical Corps personnel, doctors and nurses. Lady Nelson began a lengthy duty as a vessel of succor and mercy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid Fred Sankoff, 1968

### 3. Sinking and Salvage

The war had raged on for well over two years as 10 March 1942 approached. In Canada, there was evidence of massive destruction all along its Atlantic coast as convoys exited Halifax for Europe. These convoys were attacked and torpedoed relentlessly. Our eastern seaboard was swarmed by marauding submarine captains, who sunk an average of 400,000 tons of shipping per month. The sound and sights of their carnage was easily heard, seen, and found in the flotsam of lost cargo and wreckage all round Halifax and her approaches. It all floated freely to shore. In fact, 1942 proved to be one of the worst years of the war.<sup>18</sup>

Captain Morris O'Hara's life was about to change that year. Morris O'Hara, First Officer aboard the Lady Nelson was expecting a quiet uneventful layover at St Lucia.<sup>19</sup> Lady Nelson had just docked at Port Castries, laying along side another vessel, Umtata.

O'Hara's voyage began on 27 Feb 1942, as Lady Nelson left Halifax once again loaded with general cargo and passengers for destinations in the Caribbean. It proved to be a tense but uneventful trip until she put into Port Castries, St Lucia under command of Captain Welch, 10 March 1942. Lady Nelson took her regular berth alongside the wharf near Umtata and began discharging her cargo.

The ship's company finally relaxed. They assumed they were safe now within the confines of this small harbour, and that nothing untoward could happen. The trip so far had been harrowing and nerves were still taut. The crew was well aware of the fate of other Canadian National Steamships (CNS) and that many of their peers had been lost. The sinking of the other CNS ships left the Captain and crew of Lady Nelson jumpy. But they had arrived at St Lucia safely! Fear let go to weariness and they relaxed. The Captain for the first night in a long while, was able to climb into bed and sleep in pajamas. Captain Welch spent many a night sleeping in his working garb, grabbing a few winks of sleep on a hard settee in his room, while waiting to go into action at an instant if called to.<sup>20</sup>

U-161 had been watching the harbour waiting for a likely target on the evening of 10 March 1942. She found two favourable targets in Lady Nelson and Umtata. Albrecht Achilles commander of U-161 did not hurry, he waited for the protection of the night, and began his approach to attack the harbour at 1030 PM the evening of 10 Mar 1942.

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<sup>18</sup> Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, M.B.E., **The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada's West Indies Merchant Fleet**, Canadian Marine Transportation Centre, Dalhousie University, 1980, pg. 83

<sup>19</sup> Frank Miller, **True Son of the Sea- Fourth Generation of Nova Scotia Family of Skippers**, The Halifax Chronicle Herald, 18 March 1950

<sup>20</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg.83

U-161 began inching its way into the harbour entrance, careful not to alert its defences.<sup>21</sup>

U-161 struck hard and fired two torpedoes into the harbour at 4:49 AM (German Naval time given). The first torpedo hit Lady Nelson while the other found Umtata.



U-boat Net - Photo courtesy of Library of Contemporary History, Stuttgart

Devastation reigned. Both were struck and sunk by the stern. Three crew members, two gunners and 15 passengers aboard Lady Nelson were lost. The loss was relatively small given that 116 crew members, 110 passengers and two gunners were aboard. But U-161's reign of devastation was felt ashore as well. Seven dock workers were also lost that night.<sup>22</sup>

There was more to Achilles' attack than a straight in and out approach. His attack was brilliantly conducted. Achilles carefully navigated U-161 along the harbour and sighted the Lady Nelson. But his approach had not gone unnoticed: "The U-boat had been seen entering the harbour by a police lookout at Vigie Lighthouse, but due to faulty communication no alarm could be given before any torpedoed was fired." His luck held despite being spotted by police stationed at Vigie Lighthouse. They vainly attempted to raise the alarm before Lady Nelson and Umtata were attacked. Their warning never made it in time. Their communications failed miserably.<sup>23</sup>

The docked ships were plum targets. They were fully lit as black out of shipping was not fully enforced at the time. Still they were not totally defenceless. Lady Nelson was blessed with a 4-inch naval gun left over from the Great War for its protection. But the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>22</sup> U-Boat.net, **Ships hit by U-boats, Lady Nelson**, © 1995 - 2018 Guðmundur Helgason

Source: <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/1418.html>

Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>23</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

gunners were now “off duty” and ashore on leave for a little “Rest & Recreation”. Nothing stood in the way of forestalling or thwarting Achilles’ attack.<sup>24</sup>

Achilles’ torpedoes hit home and within 10 minutes Lady Nelson was sinking and abandoned. U-161 backed her way out to open sea and made a clean getaway but not before she was fired upon by machine guns from the St Lucia Police stationed at the mouth of the Harbour. It was too little, too late, U-161 sustained no damage or casualties.<sup>25</sup>

By now the Lady Nelson had settled by the stern with a large gaping hole but most of her hull remained above water. There was negligible damage to the shore establishment, so it could be put to immediate use to the rescue and salvage of the damaged ships.<sup>26</sup>

There was much debate on what should be done with the ship next. But it was determined that it would be a relatively easy salvage job. So, why not give it a try? It was finally decided to remove the salvageable cargo and save the ship. Salvors were contracted, and a week later the salvage vessel, Killerig arrived. The ship was refloated, repaired, and towed to Mobile Alabama.<sup>27</sup>

It was a busy job. Some of the crew were recruited to help the salvors. The rest were either retained to crew the ship when ready or were sent home immediately. Nelson’s Master George Welch signed a Lloyds “No Cure – No Pay” open form of salvage agreement with the salvors and by 26 March his ship was successfully refloated along the side wharf.<sup>28</sup>

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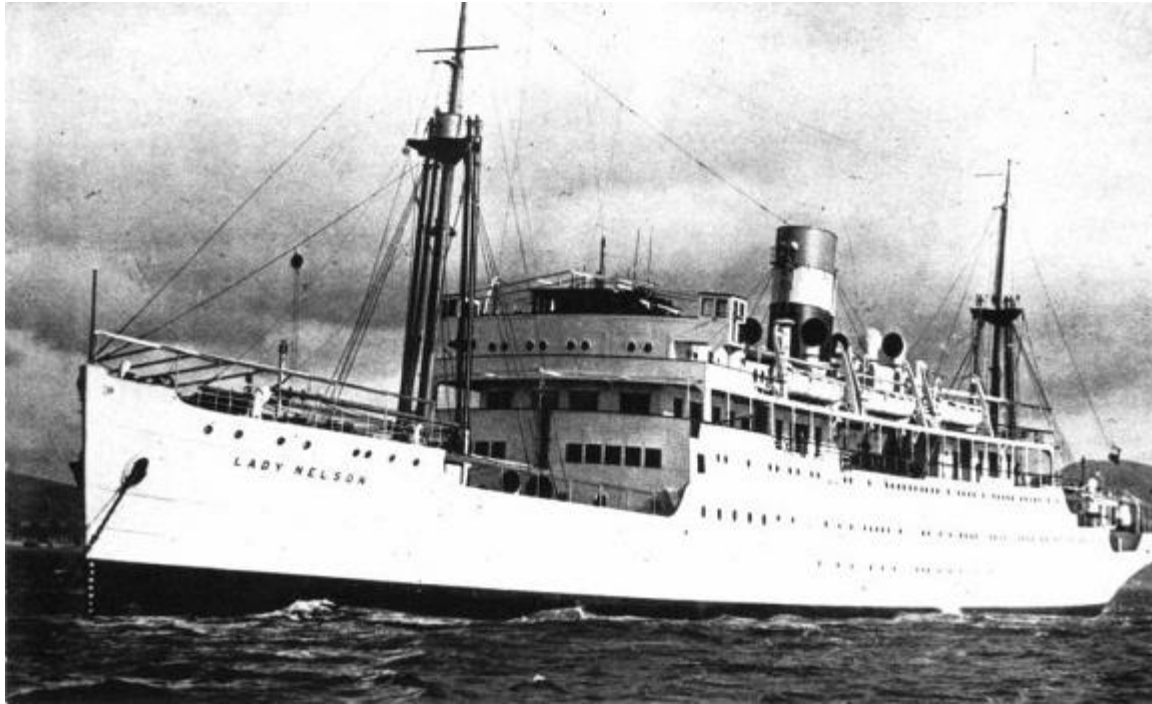
<sup>24</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>25</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>26</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>27</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84

<sup>28</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 84



U-boat Net – Lady Nelson Photograph courtesy of Tim Webb

It was most fortunate that Lady Nelson and Umtata both sank in shallow waters. Although damaged, they were salvable. They were soon raised from the bottom, Lady Nelson on 16 April 1942. By 20 April all salvageable cargo had been removed, and the ship was in the final phases of making ready to sail. Nelson's 4-inch gun was removed and given to St Lucia Police where it was mounted at Vigie Point to be manned by a police detachment.<sup>29</sup>

The day finally came, May 11, where Lady Nelson sailed under tow of the salvage vessel, Edmund J. Moran. They weren't about to make the passage alone. They had a naval escort. Still those aboard were not sanguine on their chances of making this passage in such a damaged ship or even of surviving a 5 – 10 knot voyage without being torpedoed by the Germans once again. But she did it despite the odds and made a triumphant arrival in Mobile on 29 May two weeks after departure from St Lucia.<sup>30</sup> She was recommissioned on 22 April 1943.<sup>31</sup>

It all seemed so easy on the surface but the voyage from St Lucia to Mobile was fraught with peril. It was a voyage of courage and heroism. Lady Nelson was in rough state, barely fit for service after being torpedoed. Her crew stood in constant fear of losing the ship. Their journey to Mobile was an epic tale.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 85

<sup>30</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 85

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, U-Boat.net, **Ships hit by U-boats, Lady Nelson**, 2018

#### 4. British Empire Medal Citations Officers and Crew Lady Nelson 1942<sup>32</sup>

Morris O'Hara was aboard the Lady Nelson the night she was torpedoed 10 March 1942. He was its First Officer.<sup>33</sup> O'Hara was awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) for his efforts in saving the Lady Nelson. He was cited for his valuable work under trying conditions in the Merchant Navy.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, O'Hara's BEM 1943 citation contained very little detail on his role in saving the ship. It must have been significant, for he was publicly acknowledged. The total effort though, was chronicled in the separate details of the other BEM citations of those who saved the ship. All these citations, when pieced together, paint the true picture of horror, courage and salvation to what the crew faced, and in what they had accomplished!

The Ship's master, Captain George W. Welch, and John Paul MacDonald, his Chief Engineer were determined to bring Lady Nelson to Mobile. MacDonald was subsequently awarded the Order of the British Empire. MacDonald's citation explains the situation and the extent of the devastation from U-161's attack.

"While tied up alongside the wharf at the inner berth in harbour of Castries, St. Lucia, British West Indies," Lady Nelson was struck by one torpedo fired by an enemy submarine. It had sustained damage. The ship's bottom plating; from stern to middle No.4 Hold, about 60 feet in length, extending from keel to deck, entailing port propeller and shaft, was completely gone. The rudder was blown out of its pintle. The bulkheads obviously sprung, and water was taken in all holds, except for the No.1, which had a depth of eight feet. Lady Nelson's engine and boiler rooms were flooded to its

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<sup>32</sup> Anon., **Canadian Order Decorations and Medals, *British Orders to Canadians, United Kingdom, Files - 18-2-1 Volume 1 - "Honours, Decorations and Awards - British Empire Medal" Files - 18-2-1 Volume 1 - "Honours, Decorations and Awards - British Empire - General" RG.12 Box 1105, 2018***

Source: <http://www.blatherwick.net/documents/Royal%20Canadian%20Navy%20Citations/11%20-%20Canadians%20in%20Merchant%20Navy%20WW2.pdf>

Accessed: 2 June 2018

Author's note: unless other wise indicated, this citation was used for the entire section. Further to retain the tone and historical scope/context, and to avoid error, the stories are direct cuts from the individual citations of the incident. These were combined to paint a picture that details the true tale and develops the scope of the incident.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Frank Miller, 18 March 1950

<sup>34</sup> O'HARA, Morris, Chief Engineer - Member - Order of the British Empire (MBE) - Montreal - Awarded as per Canada Gazette of 5 June 1943 and London Gazette of (?)

coamings. She settled by stern to midship on mud upright, the poop being just above water.”<sup>35</sup> It was a harrowing description of what had occurred.

John Paul MacDonald, his Chief Engineer stood by his ship after the torpedoing despite the imminent danger of further attack. His main turbines were awash at approximately 10:49 p.m. The lights from his main generators died down very soon after at 10:50 p.m. and emergency lights were put on. The ship’s emergency generator kept things running for a time. Watertight doors were released at approximately 10:51 p.m., but by then the engine and boiler rooms were flooded.

Lady Nelson’s emergency generator was finally shut off at 11:15 p.m. for the simple reason, that if a submarine was still in the vicinity, it could pick up noises of the generators on her detectors.

MacDonald was among many who stood by in the effort to save the ship. During the time the ship was in St. Lucia, he performed outstanding work with the salvage of the vessel and helped the Salvage Company in the operations, that refloated the ship and kept the water down. He was successful in putting engines and auxiliaries into as good a condition as it was possible to have them under the circumstances and had steam up on one boiler. This was of great help, as otherwise the ship would have been a "dead" tow on the run from St. Lucia to Mobile, Alabama via Jamaica, through submarine infested waters.

Clement Barrow was one of the crew who fought valiantly to save the ship. He was a seaman who served continuously during the war in submarine infested and dangerous waters. He twice served on Canadian vessels which had been torpedoed and was highly recommended by the chief Engineer as a good trustworthy servant, exceptionally faithful to his duties. He too, stood by Lady Nelson in her hour of need.

Mr. Barrow was a fireman on the Lady Nelson the night she was torpedoed. Mr. Barrow performed that duty first on Lady Nelson and then on Lady Drake, all in submarine infested and dangerous waters.<sup>36</sup>

It was truly a team effort that took to salvage the ship. John Christiansen was Ship's Carpenter. He was born in Denmark in 1890 and grew up in a naval family. His father too was a merchant navy captain. Christiansen immigrated to Canada in the late 20s or early 30s and married Marion Ross in the 30s.

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<sup>35</sup> MACDONALD, John Paul, Chief Engineer - Officer - Order of the British Empire (OBE) - Canadian National Steamship Lady Nelson - Awarded as per Canada Gazette of 8 January 1944 and London Gazette of 1 January 1944. Home: Halifax, Nova Scotia.

<sup>36</sup> BARROW, Clement, Oiler - British Empire Medal (BEM) - Canadian National Steamships - Awarded as per Canada Gazette of 5 January 1946 and London Gazette of 1 January 1946. Home: St. Michael's, Barbados, British West Indies. BARROW, Clement, Oiler, MN, CN Steamships, BEM(Civil)~ [5.1.46]



Christiansen made the temporary repairs that were immediately required, which most likely saved the ship.<sup>37</sup> It was Christiansen's skills and actions along the way that brought them finally to Mobile. The bravery of his comrades had gone largely unnoticed in the public accounts, but Christiansen's citation and courage were noteworthy.

"Here is a typical act of bravery which did receive recognition quoted from an official publication as, 'John Christensen is a ship's carpenter of a large merchant vessel which was torpedoed in the South Atlantic. Temporary repairs had to be effected at once and these were effected by Christensen. He displayed great courage and devotion to duty for 18 days on repairs to prevent the bulkhead giving way under pressure.'"<sup>38</sup> Everywhere the crew went, it seemed that danger followed.

Paul MacDonald was with the ship from the time of torpedoing until the latter part of April. He was recalled by the Company and returned to Canada to take over the Chief Engineer's duties aboard the Lady Rodney. While en-route to Canada from St. Lucia as a passenger on the Lady Drake; he once again was torpedoed, and the Lady Drake lost north of Bermuda.

The torch of Second Engineer now passed to Michael Joseph Moyle. Moyle remained with the ship from the time of its torpedoing at St. Lucia until she reached Mobile, Alabama, the repair port. During the time Mr. Moyle was in St. Lucia, he assisted the Chief Engineer in performing the outstanding work in connection with the salvaging of the vessel. He too assisted the Salvage Company in the operations that refloated the ship.

Moyle put the engines and auxiliaries right and in as good a condition as was possible to have them, under the circumstances. The ship was able to finally steam on at least one boiler. This was a great help, as otherwise the ship would have been a "dead" tow on the run to Mobile, Alabama. Moyle was appointed as Chief Engineer on the voyage to Mobile, rendering great service under difficult conditions in the hazardous task of towing a disabled ship.<sup>39</sup>

The salvors presented a bill for \$138,750 which CNS paid without hesitation. They were very pleased and satisfied with the salvor's performance and work.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> CHRISTIANSEN (CHRISTIANSON), John, Carpenter - British Empire Medal (BEM) - Canadian National Steamships Lady Nelson - Awarded as per London Gazette of 14 June 1945 (no Canada Gazette).

<sup>38</sup> Anon. Hamilton Spectator, Behind the Lines – Men of Merchant Marine Earn Bright Chapters in Book of Heroes, 30 Aug 1943 (Canada War Museum Newspaper archives 149 War: European 1939: Cana(dian) Hamilton Behind the Lines)

<sup>39</sup> MOYLE, Michael Joseph, Second Engineer - Member - Order of the British Empire (MBE) - Canadian National Steamship 'Lady Nelson' - Awarded as per Canada Gazette of 10 June 1944 and London Gazette of 8 June 1944. Home: Montreal, Quebec.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 85

It took the efforts of many to save the ship. And save her they did, for she was to have a new life as a hospital ship. Here Lady Nelson played a key and important role from 1943 to 1945, where Captain Morris O'Hara would finally come to command her.

## 5. Details of the Attack of U161 10 March 1942 St Lucia

U-161 commanded by Albrecht Achilles, approached the Island of St. Lucia on 10 March 1942. St. Lucia was a favourite pre-war vacation paradise for winter weary Canadians and was frequented by the Canadian National Steamship Ltd., of Montreal. One of the ships on that service was the Lady Nelson.

Lady Nelson, one of the Lady Class ships, was especially designed for the West Indian service. She carried both cargo and freight as well as paying passengers. Five ships were employed on a year-round service; three on an eastern route encompassing; Lady Nelson, Lady Hawkins and Lady Drake; with two on a western route, Lady Somers and Lady Rodney.<sup>41</sup>

U-161 was on the hunt at the harbours edge at Port Castries when Achilles spotted Lady Nelson and Umtata docked in St Lucia. U-161 managed to slip into the harbour where both ships lay along side one another.<sup>42</sup> Achilles fired two torpedoes into the harbour at 04.49 hours (German Naval time) on 10 March 1942.<sup>43</sup>

Lady Nelson was struck first. The torpedo's impact was devastating. Lady Nelson caught fire and sunk by her stern in shallow waters. U-161's second torpedo then struck the Umtata .<sup>44</sup> It too was hit and sunk by the stern. U-161 then reversed its course and slipped out the way she came in, moving back out to open sea.<sup>45</sup>

It proved to be a lucrative night's work for U-161 and Albrecht Achilles!

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<sup>41</sup> John Boileau, The Lady Boats, Legion Magazine, 1 January 2007, Source: <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2007/01/the-lady-boats/> Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, John Boileau, 28 May 2018

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, U-boat.net, [Ships hit by U-boats](#), 2018

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, U-boat.net, [Ships hit by U-boats](#), 2018

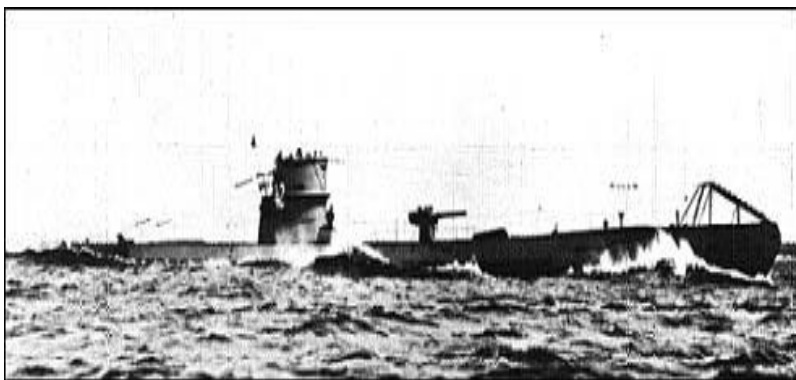
<sup>45</sup> Ibid, John Boileau, 28 May 2018



U-Boat.net (with permission) Kptl Albrecht Achilles after a patrol

Korvettenkapitän (posthumous) Albrecht Achilles was an outstanding leader and U-boat commander, who began his naval career in April 1934. He served for a time on the school ship Schleswig-Holstein. That was followed by a posting to the battleship Gneisenau. Achilles later spent a year at the Marineschule Mürwik instructing future officers. He was finally transferred from surface ships to the U-boat force in April 1940.<sup>46</sup>

On January 1942 Achilles took command of a U-Boat class IXC boat, U-161. U-161 was a long-range craft, that operated mostly in the Caribbean, but was also found at times in Brazilian and African waters.



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<sup>46</sup> U-boat.net, **Greatest U-Boat Commanders**, 2018

U-Boat.net (with permission) – Type IX U-boat

Unfortunately, Albrecht Achilles' luck eventually ran cold when the war caught up with U-161, 27 September 1943. U-161 was attacked by Lt (jg) H.B. Pattersen, pilot in command of a US Mariner aircraft from VP-74 Sqn USN. Pattersen found U-161 northeast of Bahia at 12 degrees 30 south/35 degrees 35 west, in the South Atlantic, east of Salvador.<sup>47</sup>

It proved to be a desperate fight between these two adversaries. U-161 was surfaced and opened on Pattersen's aircraft with all it had. Thirty-seven-millimeter cannon shot peppered Pattersen's aircraft causing damage that holed his aircraft severely. Shrapnel exploded internally causing both physical harm to the plane and crew. Regardless Pattersen persisted in the attack and launched his ordnance.



U-Boat.net (with permission) Mariner Aircraft

U-161 was subsequently sunk with all aboard. There were no survivors.<sup>48</sup>

Pattersen broke off his attack and returned to base. His aircraft was damaged, and he had wounded aboard. U-161's 37mm shell exploded just forward of the galley door, injuring his Bombardier, ENS Oliver Bret, and Radio/Radar Operator ARM1/c Dean Bealer. Bret was removed by stretcher to a waiting ambulance while Bealer was assisted in walking off the aircraft.

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<sup>47</sup> Axel Nestlé, **German U-Boat Losses During World War II – Details of Destruction**, Frontline Books, London, 2014, pg.121

<sup>48</sup> Ibid Nestlé, 2014



U-Boat.net (with permission) - ENS Oliver Bret safely removed from PBM-5 Mariner

Pattersen's amphibious Mariner sustained considerable damage, as evidence from leaking from the front nose wheel well. His fuselage also received considerable damage particularly in the area behind the pilot. There a 37mm shell exploded in the galley area. Shrapnel violently exited the aircraft causing harm to the crew along the way. Shrapnel finally impacted on the wing opposite from its point of entry near the rotary inverters that caused a loss of the aircraft's electric instruments.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid U-Boat.net, from captions of photographs courtesy of the family of LTJG Harry Patterson (the pilot of 74-P-2)



U-Boat.net (with permission) Martin PBM – 5 Mariner -note water leaking

Albrecht Achilles did not survive the war. He died along with 52 members of his crew that day, 27 September 1943. Pattersen's attack was successful that sadly, put paid to an illustrious career.



U-Boat.net (with permission) - Korvettenkapitän (posthumous) Albrecht Achilles

Albrecht Achilles commanded 6 patrols in which he sunk 13 ships (63,412 tons) and damaged five (35,672 tons). Achilles ranked 35<sup>th</sup> amongst the top 50 leading U-boat aces. This select group alone conducted some 346 war patrols in which 715 ships were sunk. The group's score totalled 3,584,075 tons of Allied shipping. Albrecht Achilles was a very highly decorated officer amongst this group; first awarded the Fleet War Badge, Iron Cross 2nd Class, U-boat War Badge 1939, followed by an Iron Cross 1st Class and the Knights Cross.<sup>50</sup>

Albrecht Achilles was a formidable warrior who had engaged an equally formidable foe, Lt (jg) H.B. Pattersen (USN). Like all warriors, Albrecht Achilles fought bravely doing his duty and utmost on behalf of his country, but like many too, his life was sacrificed in doing so.

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<sup>50</sup> U-boat.net, **Greatest U-Boat Commanders**, 2018



## 6. Hospital Ship Lady Nelson

Day broke 10 March 1942 with Lady Nelson and Umtata laying on the bottom of the harbour in Port Castries, St. Lucia. They were very lucky in one regard. Both had sunk in shallow waters and, both were salvable.

U-161's attack was completely unanticipated and unexpected. The crew had settled down for port routine. They thought that they were out of immediate danger. For the first time in ever so long, Captain George W. Welch finally took off his clothes and put on his pyjamas for a good night's rest.<sup>51</sup>

It was a matter of habit while at sea, the crew always slept with their clothes on. If torpedoed, they would be prepared, to leave the ship at a moment's notice. Another lifesaving habit was having your life jacket at the ready, often sleeping with one arm through it. If the worst came to worst, you were ready to go in an instant. Captain Welch was doomed not to get his well deserved good night's sleep. His ship was torpedoed and sunk just as he got into bed.<sup>52</sup> Death and destruction now lay all about him. Three crew members, two gunners, and 15 passengers aboard Lady Nelson were lost.

The survivors soon abandoned ship as best they could, many jumping over the side and making a swim for it. The loss on the ship was relatively small given the manifest of 116 crew members, 110 passengers and two gunners aboard. The devastation was also felt beyond the ship though. Seven dock workers ashore were lost as well.<sup>53</sup>

Sadly, the largest number of Lady Nelson's casualties were found amongst the 'deckers'. Deck passengers were billeted on the open deck with little protection. Deck passengers were local people who used the Lady Boats as a tram system in moving from one island to another in voyages of short duration. They suffered greatly from the initial blows of U-161's torpedoes. Only moments before many were happily singing on the poop deck passing time, and now 15 were dead. Unlike cabin passengers they were exposed to the full force of the exploding torpedo.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> U-boat.net crew list – identifies Captain George W. Welch as Master of Lady Nelson 10 March 1942

<sup>52</sup> Canada Veteran's Affairs, Oral History, Lady Nelson, Mr. Pike (Transcript)\_undated

Source <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/video-gallery/video/6984>

Accessed: 8 June 2018

<sup>53</sup> U-Boat.net, **Ships hit by U-boats, Lady Nelson**, © 1995 - 2018 Guðmundur Helgason

Source: <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/1418.html>

Accessed: 28 May 2018

<sup>54</sup> Anon. **Former Lady Nelson Ready After Year of Refitting for Service as Hospital**, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

Further details were finally made public on U-161's attack when censorship regulations permitted their publication some months later.<sup>55</sup> News accounts suggested that torpedoes were fired by a German raider who blasted his way through a protective submarine net. Three torpedoes were subsequently launched; one each struck and sunk Lady Nelson and Umtata only 50 feet away in shallow waters. A third ship was also attacked but escaped unscathed.

What is most remarkable was the fact that U-161 and Achilles made this daring attack largely unchallenged inside the protected harbour. U-161 made its way back through the damaged submarine net out to open sea.<sup>56</sup> Achilles' retreat back through the net was both a display of remarkable seamanship and courage. However, some doubt exists if an effective barrier was ever in place.<sup>57</sup> Achilles' attack also announced his U-boat's presence and clearly identified his location. It followed that over the next year, the hunter would become the hunted!

Later that day on 10 March, Ralph Owen a crewman aboard **Lady Nelson** swam back to the ship to get his papers. He stayed with the ship when she was refloated and was aboard when it finally made its way to Mobile, Alabama, staying on through out its repairs.<sup>58</sup>

Others too rejoined the ship. George Kenneth Hewitt was another survivor of the attack. George rejoined the ship later after its conversion to a hospital ship. George like many others was a company man and continued to work for CNS after the war.<sup>59</sup>

Lady Nelson was subsequently refloated along with Umtata, then spent the better part of a year in refit at Mobile from May 1942 to April 1943 when it was relaunched as a hospital ship. All its luxurious features were removed and replaced with medical equipment and facilities as she was transformed.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, Mr. Pike (Transcript)\_undated

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, U-boat.net, **Ships hit by U-boats**, 2018

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, U-boat.net, [Ships hit by U-boats](#), 2018

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, John Boileau, 28 May 2018



*Canadian National Steamship "Lady Nelson" - private suite; Library and Archives Canada/Canadian National Railway Company fonds/e010861251*

Months of reconstruction turned Lady Nelson into a new ship. Captain Welch remained in command during the refit. Lady Nelson was renamed No. 46 and was Canada's first hospital ship; accommodating more than 500 sick and wounded in lieu of 250 paying passengers.

Lady Nelson was fully equipped. There were operating rooms, sterilizers, X-ray facilities, all manner of appliances required in a modern hospital. The wards were of various sizes that met the particular needs of both the staff and wounded. Two small ante-rooms were set aside for the use of the medical staff, one for nursing sisters, and one for the medical officers.<sup>61</sup>

Accommodation was made for 200 walking and 300 stretcher casualties. There were 12 wards. The most serious cases were placed in specially constructed swinging berths. Some provision was made for a ward for men who suffered from what is now know as

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Each of the 12 wards had an electric refrigerator and five kitchens accommodated meals for all.<sup>62</sup>

Food was especially important to morale. There were dieticians aboard who prepared the food and sent them to the various wards using a dumb waiter system. Nutritious food was thus served hot in a very appealing manner.<sup>63</sup>



*Personnel of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (R.C.A.M.C.) aboard the hospital ship S.S. LADY NELSON, England, 4 October 1943*

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/Department of National Defence fonds/a194130; and Canada Science and Technology Museum; CN005779/

The ship was operated by civilian personnel under command of Captain George Welch. Many of the ship's crew and officers returned to serve with him. The medical staff was supplied by the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps; comprised of 9 medical officers, 14 nursing sisters, and 60 other ranks. Spiritual care was provided by two Army Chaplains; Protestant and Roman Catholic. It was a formidable establishment.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

On 13 April 1943, Lady Nelson (No. 46) assumed her duties as a hospital ship.<sup>65</sup> There was much enthusiasm for the new task.<sup>66</sup> No. 46 served “All Canadians of any Service, in the army, navy, or air force, (who) will have first call on this new ship, which...fully outfitted here with stores for a return trip across the Atlantic.”<sup>67</sup> Lady Nelson now entered a new phase in her service during the Second World War.

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<sup>65</sup> Anon. **Lady Nelson Becomes Canada’s First Regular Hospital Ship**, *Globe and Mail*, 14 April 1943

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, *Toronto Telegram*, 15 April 1943

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, *Toronto Telegram*, 15 April 1943

## 7. The Italian Campaign

Audrey Metzler, nursing sister, was aboard Canada's first regular hospital ship Lady Nelson (No. 46).<sup>68</sup> Audrey anticipated her new role with eagerness. She wrote "I can't wait until we actually up-anchor and sail."<sup>69</sup> Metzler's youthful enthusiasm and that of her peers was soon to be put to the test; and that test was found in Italy.

Allied leaders met at Casablanca in January 1943 to consider their next steps in the war. They concluded that after North Africa, the next operation should be in the Mediterranean. The target was set for Sicily with the aim of forcing Italy out of the war.<sup>70</sup>

American and British armies landed in Sicily on July 10, 1943. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division and 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade were on the left flank of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army. All of Canada's armed services were represented in this invasion. RCN landing craft supported the troops. Three Canadian bomber squadrons operated temporarily from bases in Tunisia supporting the ground assault, and who would later continue that support in Italy. Combat Air Patrol was provided by No. 417 Squadron, RCAF. No. 417 Squadron, RCAF flew Spitfire fighter aircraft from the beginning to the end of the Italian campaign.<sup>71</sup> It was a show of things to come in the later invasion of Northwest Europe in France on D-Day.

So, began Lady Nelson's trials in what would prove to be an eventful and busy year.

Matthew Halton, newly appointed Chief War Correspondent for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), arrived in the field at Sicily a month after the campaign had started later in August 1943. By then, the Sicily operation was already over. But radio was a new medium bringing immediacy to the events. Canadian families at home clung on his every word for news of their loved ones as he reported the events in Italy.<sup>72</sup>

Politics played a big role regarding Canada's involvement in the Italian Campaign. Canadians invested heavily in the war effort and wanted to see a return on their investment. There came a clamour to get Canadian troops out of barracks in Britain and

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<sup>68</sup> Anon. Lady Nelson Becomes Canada's First Regular Hospital Ship, Globe and Mail, 14 April 1943

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, Toronto Telegram, 15 April 1943

<sup>70</sup> Canada, Canadian War Museum, Operations – The Sicilian and Italian Campaigns, 1943-1945, 2018

Source:

[https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/operations/sicilianitalian\\_e.shtml](https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/newspapers/operations/sicilianitalian_e.shtml)

Accessed: 12 Jun 2018

<sup>71</sup> Ibid Canada War Museum – Sicily and Italian Campaigns 1943-1945

<sup>72</sup> David Halton, **Dispatches from the Front – Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War**, McClelland and Stewart, 2014, pg. 188-89

into battle, somewhere. It was this same clamour that once fed the grist mill of death at Dieppe.

Regardless of politics, Canadian troops needed some battle experience if they were ever to overcome what eventually faced them in Northwest Europe. Sicily was supposed to be the limited trial to foster combat experience under fire. But what was to be a limited trial, turned out to be a full-blown involvement. Sicily was the primer for the invasion of Italy, the next target.

Churchill wanted action in Italy and ordered Montgomery's 8<sup>th</sup> Army to do something about it. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army was about to face its bloodiest fighting since El Alamein. But this time, Canada was greatly involved. The Canadians were Montgomery's spearhead in the operation.<sup>73</sup>

British-Canadian forces waited for the invasion in the toe of Italy at Messina on 2 Sep 1943.<sup>74</sup> They were only intended to be used as a feint. The purpose of this operation was to draw German divisions down from the north of Italy by giving an impression that the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Army was being employed. The main assault was planned further north, at Salerno. The Allied strategy then was simple; draw the German forces down south and, cut them off with US forces had they come that way.<sup>75</sup>

There was never any intention of using Canadian troops in the assault and invasion of the Italian mainland. Indeed, shipping had been allocated to take the Canadians back to England as soon as the campaign in Sicily had ended. But a request came from Montgomery for the Canadians to remain with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. He required them.

Montgomery's reasoning for this request was simple. He felt some of the British regiments in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had priority for this shipping over the Canadians. He wanted his troops repatriated early as many were to fight on the 2<sup>nd</sup> front shortly. His reasoning continued, he argued that many had been away from home for a long time, they deserved to be repatriated first.

It seemed only fair to Montgomery that his men, should ***get home before Christmas***. It would mean more to them ***than it would to the Canadians*** to spend time home with their families. The Canadians were not heading back to Canada any time soon. There was compassionate reasoning behind the decision for retaining the Canadians and sending British troops home to England ahead of them.<sup>76</sup>

Regrettably, Canadian authorities bought it. It proved to be a fateful decision. The Canadian Divisions were only to be there long enough to carry out a landing at Reggio. Canadian authorities acquiesced to Montgomery's request with one proviso; Canadian

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 193

<sup>74</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 191

<sup>75</sup> Richard S Malone, A Portrait of War 1939-1943, Collins, Toronto,1983, pg. 176

<sup>76</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 176

troops were only to be employed for “limited operations in the toe of Italy.” Once that limited operation was completed, they were to be returned to the United Kingdom.<sup>77</sup>

It never happened as planned. Three weeks prior to Christmas, Canadian troops encountered some of the deadliest and fiercest fighting during the Italian Campaign. Additionally, they battled under appalling weather conditions and fought bravely through mountain roads deep in snow and crossed valleys swimming in mud. It all added to their pain and suffering. It proved to be a difficult slog.<sup>78</sup>

It was a desperate effort that was seen through by perseverance that saw one obstacle after another crossed and liberated. Canadian’s captured town after town along the way then came their next daunting task, Ortona, as Christmas Day approached.

Ortona was attacked in early December. But Ortona was not easily taken. By Christmas Day the Edmonton’s and Seaforth’s launched a joint effort against the town to try and dislodge the Germans to finally take it.<sup>79</sup>

Canadians had been in action from September to October that year. They were briefly pulled out of the line to rest and re-equip. German resistance was tough but not impenetrable. That had all changed by mid-November. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division’s easy days came to an end as German resistance stiffened considerably at a time when the plans for Ortona were considered.

German forces were ordered to dig in along a winter line, in a series of well fortified defensive positions that stretched from Gaeta in the east, 177 Kms south of Rome. Their lines continued across the peninsula thence on to Ortona on Italy’s Adriatic coast.<sup>80</sup>

It became intense. Montgomery ordered an attack in early December against the German Winter Line. The Canadians were ordered to attack across the Moro River and capture the town of Ortona for it was of vital importance. Ortona opened the road north across the mountains that led to Rome.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, began the battle that became known as the Italian Campaign’s “miniature Stalingrad”.<sup>82</sup> It was brutal house to house, hand to hand combat; where no mercy was given nor shown. Blood flowed freely in the streets and death hid around every corner.

On 8 Dec Halton recorded the battle behind an old wall near San Vito Chietino. He described one attack across the valley toward the German positions. For a week over Christmas, Canadians clung to their radios, fixated on this battle fought by their sons

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 176

<sup>78</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 213

<sup>79</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 213

<sup>80</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 192

<sup>81</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 196

<sup>82</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 200



now raging in the town of Ortona. It was all to close to Christmas. The attack for the town began proper, 20 Dec 1943.<sup>83</sup>

The climax to Ortona, the “miniature Stalingrad”, occurred Christmas day. Fighting was without let up. But time was made to remember the day and events planned. Some members of the Seaforth Highlanders gathered in shifts for a men’s Christmas dinner some few blocks from the fighting in the shelled-out Church at Santa Maria di Constantinopoli. It was but a few grateful moments of peace and respite from death, away from the battle raging only a few blocks away. Others fearing for their lives, avoided the feast altogether.



Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, Christmas in Ortona, Santa Maria di Constantinopoli Church 25 Dec 1943  
(With permission)

At the end of the day Mathew Halton found himself in a forward field hospital with his sound engineer Art Holmes. An accordionist was there entertaining, playing carols for the wounded and dying. Holmes had strung a cable into a ward for “life cases” those

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 199-200

who might or might not live so they could listen in. Several carols were recorded for the Homefront. Halton was about to pack up and leave when the accordionist finished.

Suddenly one young soldier woke up from a coma. Halton saw him awake and continued recording. The soldier was aware of the music played around him. He became lucid long enough to ask the accordionist "Corporal, I've been dreaming of home. Would you play something for me?" This is one sentiment that all soldiers share, the sound of a familiar tune; particularly, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas."<sup>84</sup>

The young Corporal sat down to play. He had just finished playing as the young soldier died. It was heart breaking.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 201



Infantrymen of the 48th Highlanders of Canada dealing with a German counterattack, San Leonardo di Ortona, Italy, 10 December 1943.

Lieut. Frederick G. Whitcombe / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-166566

Pain and suffering was endured by both sides that Christmas Day. Fifty years on, CBC did a documentary on the battle and interviewed belligerents from both sides. Ortona was remembered by one German Stretcher bearer with dread. He openly wept in recalling the dead and broken bodies. Like many of his contemporaries who

experienced that battle, he was never able to celebrate Christmas again. “It’s as though I am dead on those days”, he said.<sup>85</sup>

The bitter fighting continued through the month of December and grief was felt by every regiment in the Division. All shared the burden at some point, and for some, that resulted in the ultimate sacrifice of certain death. The casualty count was high. Military records often refer to casualties as “wastage”, and wastage was high enough in Ortona alone.



Troopers of "A" Squadron, The Calgary Regiment, who are under enemy shellfire, digging a grave for a comrade who was killed by shrapnel, San Leonardo di Ortona, Italy, 8 December 1943.

Credit: Lieut. Terry F. Rowe / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-180092

In the end some 176 officers and 2136 other ranks were either killed or wounded. Ortona proved to be a deadly encounter that was an all or nothing effort.

By the time Ortona was captured, Canadian strength was completely exhausted, and the advance halted for a time.<sup>86</sup> It wasn't to be the end though. Canadians fought on through Italy.

On 24-25 May 1944 the Canadians fought one of their very last major engagements in Italy. They were ordered to make the Melfa Crossing in the Liri Valley.<sup>87</sup> Only some few weeks later, on 5 June, Rome was joyfully liberated. The Canadian Army's

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid David Halton, 2014, Pg. 201

<sup>86</sup> Ibid Malone, 1983, pg. 213

<sup>87</sup> David E. Graves (ed)., **More Fighting for Canada Five Battles, 1760-1944, "A Perfect Example of Teamwork:" The Battle for Melfa Crossing 24-25 May 1944**, Robin Brass Studio, Toronto, 2004, pg. 237-309.

achievements in Italy were soon forgotten though as they were overshadowed by D-Day in Normandy 6 June 1944.

In the meantime, Lady Nelson, and Captain O'Hara, stood by waiting. Both had a particularly important role in providing relief and succour to the wounded, some of whom were soon on their way home if wounded seriously enough. Others were patched up, convalesced in England, and then, were sent back into the line in the final drive of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Front that followed D-Day 6 June 1944.

## 8. The Italian Campaign Returning Wounded to Canada

Lady Nelson and Captain O'Hara stood by awaiting the wounded. The crew and ship were now part of a tremendous enterprise. Lady Nelson was their safe haven in Italy and way home to Canada.

Lady Nelson was responsible for the safe evacuation of Canadian wounded from this theatre of operations. She came to Naples, Italy twice to evacuate Canadian wounded.<sup>88</sup>

Lady Nelson's first mission to Naples began in Halifax 14 Jan 1944. Her second commenced at Naples 12 Mar that was the reverse, ending in Halifax 12 Apr. But Naples wasn't her first or only foray into the Mediterranean. She had already completed 8 voyages to and from Halifax or Avonmouth through the Mediterranean to Gibraltar, Algiers, Bizerte, sometime between 3 July and 12 December 1943.<sup>89</sup> Her service here was followed by the Italian Campaign.

The Allied landings in Italy began early September 1943. The Allies had made good progress by 27 September in advancing a considerable distance up the boot of Italy. The battlefront was a line based on Salerno on the Tyrrhenian Sea and Gulf of Naples on the Italian East coast, that crossed the Italian Peninsula 110 miles to a point north of Barletta on the Adriatic coast. Everything south of that line was in Allied hands.<sup>90</sup>



Figure from Toronto Daily Star, 27 September 1943

<sup>88</sup> Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, M.B.E., *The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada's West Indies Merchant Fleet*, Canadian Marine Transportation Centre, Dalhousie University, 1980, Pg. 85-86

<sup>89</sup> Ibid Hanington and Kelly, 1980, pg. 164 Appendix 6

<sup>90</sup> W.B. Flewman, *The War Reviewed*, Toronto Daily Star, Monday September 27, 1943

At this point a battle raged to clear Salerno and the city of Naples. The City of Naples was wracked by bombs and fighting in a desperate battle to liberate what was once, one of the world's most beautiful harbours.<sup>91</sup>

The port was finally liberated 2 October 1943 but was in shambles. The Port of Naples had been selected by the Allies as a test case. Naples was considered typical of the problems that would be encountered later in Northwest Europe.

It took three months to clear and get the Port back into operation. In the beginning. The Port was able to handle 20000 tons of in-bound cargo a day. Only some 10 months later, that tonnage rose dramatically, such that the Port handled 5.3 million tons in total.<sup>92</sup> Captain Morris O'Hara would have been in command of Lady Nelson in 1944 when the port was at the height of these activities.

But time would not wait. The wounded still had to be cared for. Help was on the way and Lady Nelson was to be a part of that help. It began 13 November when the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was augmented by other units in forming the Canadian Corps in Italy. The Corps carried with it a general hospital that had sailed directly from England. This hospital was the linch pin for survival for many Canadian casualties. It was staffed by doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, nursing sisters, dieticians, medical orderlies and many others.<sup>93</sup>

A field hospital was also a part of the casualty clearing process where the wounded were first transported across the battlefield ranging anywhere from 100 to 150 miles wide and up the Italian peninsula as the troops advance towards Rome. It proved to be both a difficult and challenging slog. Lady Nelson then played a role in the final evacuation of wounded troops back to England or Canada.

The clearing of the wounded from the field to a waiting hospital ship was difficult. The evacuation of casualties began with administering First Aid on the battlefield. The wounded were moved from the field to dressing/aid stations, thence to hospitals, and from there, on to awaiting ships bound either for Britain or Canada. They were moved from as far as Casa Berardi on the west coast of Italy on approach to Ortona on the Adriatic, to Naples on the Tyrrhenian Sea and Gulf of Naples on the east coast.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Milton Bracker, **Allies Push Nazis Back on Naples**, New York Times Special to the Globe and Mail, 23 September 1943

<sup>92</sup> Anon. **Naples Now Allied Nations' Leading Port**, Globe and Mail, 5 September 1944

<sup>93</sup> Douglas Amaron, **More Troops Reach Italy to Bolster Canadians**, Globe and Mail, 18 Sep 1943

<sup>94</sup> Fox Movietone News, Movie, **Evacuation of Canadian Casualties Near Ortona**, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, April 1944, Part 1 Of 1 (No Sound – Written Transcript Description of Scenes)

Source: <http://www.bac->

[lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=filvidandsou&IdNumber=21714](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=filvidandsou&IdNumber=21714)

Accessed: 14 Jun 2018



First-aid personnel of the Three Rivers Regiment placing Sergeant Johnny Marchand on a stretcher, Ortona, Italy, 21 December 1943.

Credit: Lieut. Terry F. Rowe / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-163927

There were several steps to evacuating the wounded. The first was protecting them as best one could in the field. Often the patient was placed in a slit trench, if available, until a jeep arrived to take him to the Regimental Aid Post. This was the first stop. The next was onto a Main Dressing Station a little further behind the line.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, Movietone News Ortona 1944



If the patient required further assistance, he would be treated at a field surgical unit where he was cleaned, assessed and operated on. Once the patient was stabilized, he was moved by ambulance to the #1 Canadian General Hospital.

The movement of wounded troops was a complex operation! It was conducted either by jeep or large truck ambulance travelling through Italy, or by train, where wounded were taken to Italian towns to a railway depot. Patients were then loaded on board waiting ambulance trains.<sup>96</sup> Every means was employed to move the wounded expeditiously and safely.



A jeep ambulance of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (R.C.A.M.C.) bringing in two wounded Canadian soldiers on the Moro River front south of San Leonardo di Ortona, Italy, 10 December 1943.

Credit: Lieut. Frederick G. Whitcombe / Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and Archives Canada / PA-180097

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, Movietone News Ortona 1944

Upon reaching the final destination of #1 Canadian General Hospital, the casualties were further assessed and cared for. They were either streamed to wards or surgical theatres as required. They were then housed in appropriate wards where they made further recovery. Once sufficiently stabilized, the patients were once again transported by ambulances, but this time to port.

Here they were loaded aboard the waiting Lady Nelson and made comfortable. Those that were able to walk, made their way to hand rails along the ship, and watched as the ship left port.<sup>97</sup> They were all loaded aboard well within the sound of raging gunfire. For the lucky ones, they were now on their way home in Lady Nelson with Captain O'Hara in command.<sup>98</sup>



Library and Archives Canada / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada  
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

*Hospital Ship, Lady Nelson*; Library and Archives Canada/Department of National Defence fonds/e010778743

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, Movietone News Ortona 1944

<sup>98</sup> Ibid Miller, 18 March 1952 (author's note – place in command at Naples in Nov 1943 by the comment of gunfire – Naples was still an active war zone next to Salerno)

Captain O'Hara as master of the ship, sailed over 200,000 nautical miles returning to Canada some 21,099 wounded troops from battlefields overseas. Morris O'Hara made 18 trips as its Captain, two of which were to Naples, where he said, "the wounded were loaded on board within the sound of gunfire".<sup>99</sup>

Captain O'Hara and Lady Nelson were kept busy that year. Five round trips were made by 25 Nov 1943, all across the Atlantic transporting troops. Many repatriated troops had fought in the Battle of Sicily that August.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid Miller, 18 March 1952



*Nursing sisters of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps (R.C.A.M.C.) aboard the hospital ship LADY NELSON, Naples, Italy, 29 January 1944*

**Source:** Library and Archives Canada/Department of National Defence fonds/a163661

Lady Nelson's fifth voyage was significant. There were 50 men aboard, prisoners of war repatriated from Europe, who had participated in the battle at Dieppe. A prisoner exchange had been arranged with the Germans, so these men could be repatriated home. All had suffered devastating wounds, were hors de combat and would never be

used to fight again.<sup>100</sup> It was to be one of the many missions of mercy that the Lady Nelson conducted.

It wasn't all work aboard Lady Nelson. There was time for fun as well. Lieutenant Marjorie McLean, nurse, attached 6 June 1945, made three trips aboard, repatriating the wounded. She also found time along the way while on layovers in England to see the sights, attend the theatre, and make trips to Edinburgh and Inverness, the land of her ancestors.<sup>101</sup> But these pleasant times did not mask the pain and suffering that she and others witnessed.

Over the next year Lady Nelson did yeoman work. She and the British Hospital ship ABA docked within two days of one another (14 November 1944) returning over 1000 wounded young Canadians. Most of the group were young men fresh from the fighting in France, and with them, a sprinkling of airmen.

The wounded suffered an eclectic mix of injuries. Here and there, one lost an eye, another a hand or leg, but all were glad to be home. There were some cheerful surprises and unexpected reunions as well. Pte Wesley Hebner of Honey Harbour, Ontario, was met on the dock and was joyfully reunited with his sister, Pte Lucy Laub of the Canadian Woman's Army Corps.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Anon. **Praise Red Cross for Parcels Sent to War Prisoners - Men returning from German Camps Voice Thanks - Are Repatriated**, Hamilton Spectator, 25 Nov 1943

<sup>101</sup> Marjorie Clark, Nurse Marjorie McLean served on 'floating hospital' in WWII, The Wellington Advisor, 30 Jan 2017

<sup>102</sup> Anon. **1,000 Wounded Reach Canada in Two Days**, Globe and Mail, 15 Nov 1944



Hospital orderly E. Hartz checks the condition of Private F.E. Arden in a ward aboard the hospital ship LADY NELSON  
Library and Archives Canada/Department of National Defence fonds/a-3227114

It was a quick turn around that found Lady Nelson and Captain O'Hara back to sea once again. She returned to Europe to pick up another load of casualties. This one was special though. Five hundred wounded souls were to be repatriated and were scheduled to arrive in Canada in time for Christmas.

It seemed simple enough, but nothing is ever simple when mother nature takes a hand. A snowstorm swept through the port of Halifax on their arrival just as the Lady Nelson steamed in. It complicated the ship's arrival, but she docked on 19 December 1944 with its precious human cargo who were able to reach their homes in time for Christmas.

The thoughts of the slush and mud of European battlegrounds evaporated, as well as the discomfiture of a rough arrival and turbulent seas. These were soon replaced by happier thoughts of home and Christmas. And it was to be a happier Christmas for some families that year.

Many returning vets suffered the ravages of war, witnessed by the missing limbs, the blinded or the bedridden. But the wounded soon forgot their misfortunes. It was lost in their excitement at being back in Canada, at home, and Christmas.

## 9. The end is in sight

Captain O'Hara made 18 trips as master of the hospital ship, Lady Nelson. He sailed over 200,000 nautical miles in doing so. His mission was one of aid and succor to Canada's war wounded. The ship's mission would change dramatically in 1945. It was no less challenging or demanding but it also marked the end of his tenure as Captain.

Peace had finally come to Europe. VE Day was celebrated by all 8 May 1945. All that was left to do now was to repatriate the troops back to Canada in an efficient and orderly manner, and in quick time. But it wasn't as simple as all that. There were additional requirements.

It was a long war, and many had set down roots and married after 5 long years in England. There were now Canadian dependents overseas who would now have to be moved as well.

Repatriating the troops and war brides set certain expectations. Families wanted to be together and moved without delay. But there was insufficient shipping capacity given the number of veterans who had to be repatriated. In the end though, the Lady Boats played a significant role to managing and achieving those expectations, in moving this mass of humanity. The troops would be brought home first, then safely reunited with their wives and families later.

The first priority remained with repatriating the wounded and war vets.<sup>103</sup> This left a growing backlog of waiting war brides and families in Europe. The headlines of the day announced the arrival of repatriated troops to anxious families desiring the expeditious return of their sons and daughters.

The Globe and Mail stated in early December 1945 that "33,000 Canadians Due Back home Before January 4". The banner headline was prominently and widely announced well before Christmas 1945.<sup>104</sup> It built up family expectations on the home front that some would be seeing their sons and daughters soon.



<sup>103</sup> Anon. **Will Complete Repatriation ERE April 20**, Globe and Mail, 3 Jan 1946

<sup>104</sup> Anon. **33,000 Canadians Due Back home Before January 4**, Globe and Mail, 6 Dec 1945

With permission Royal Canadian Medical Services Association, RCAMC Medics provide casualty care

Even with this announcement, the schedule was only tentative. There were problems with ship availability and capacity. The movement of troops was greatly aided by high capacity transport such as the Queen Elizabeth that was scheduled to carry more than 12,000 passengers to be discharged at New York. New York was chosen because of free board problems with the Harbour at Halifax. The troops were then to be transported by train to homes in Canada from there.

Others were more fortuitous. Some three lucky servicemen somehow manage to wangle a plane ride home for their wives aboard a commercial flight on Trans-Canada Airlines. Space became available and it was offered to high priority war brides. The bulk of the waiting brides, some 27,000 with 9,000 children, were not so fortunate and awaited repatriation hopefully. That was to be done by ship.<sup>105</sup>

The waiting wives became a growing problem. There remained insufficient capacity to move them all, even with the likes of the Queen Elizabeth! These larger ships soon became dedicated to moving the large volume of Canadian and American troops repatriated from Europe. There was also a priority on shipping as the war with Japan continued as some troops were to be sent to that theatre.

All these factors reduced shipping capacity. Regardless, Canadian authorities soon realized that they had a problem on their hands. They intended to speed up these removals and designated two ships to do so in the beginning. In the New Year, Lady Nelson and Lady Rodney were re-tasked and reserved for the movement of Canadian war brides and families.<sup>106</sup>

That expectation was not so easily achieved for the Lady Nelson. She still had the wounded to attend too. One of her last loads arrived 16 Jan 1946.

Lady Nelson arrived in a snowstorm. It was the first time in 5 or 6 years for many troops to be home on Canadian soil. The wounded were disembarked and loaded on two troop trains awaiting at Halifax. Four hundred and forty-nine sick and wounded Canadian War Veterans were now on their way home.<sup>107</sup>

Lady Nelson then made a quick turn around and sent back to Europe. She returned to Halifax 18 February 1946 where she discharged 486 overseas casualties and notably, three babies. This marked a turn in her mission for this was her 30<sup>th</sup> and final trip as a hospital ship. She would now be totally designated to repatriating Canadian war brides and families as part of Operation "Daddy".<sup>108</sup> And significantly, this final trip was also the final trip of Captain Morris Osbourne O'Hara as its master.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, Globe and Mail, 6 Dec 1945

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, Globe and Mail, 6 Dec 1945

<sup>107</sup> Anon. **Hospital Vessel Brings Veterans Back to Canada**, The Hamilton Spectator, 16 Jan 1946

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, The Hamilton Spectator, 16 Jan 1946





With permission Royal Canadian Medical Services Association, No. 5 Field Dressing Station, Udem Germany 2 March 1945

A notice in the *Globe and Mail* on 21 February 1946 stated, Captain William Barclay Armit, RD, RNR, RCNR, Commodore of the Canadian National Steamship fleet was appointed master of the *Lady Nelson*. Captain Armit had a distinguished service record and he would now become responsible for the repatriation effort in moving Canadian war brides and families.<sup>109</sup>

*Lady Nelson* made 30 voyages as a hospital ship in total. Captain O'Hara conducted 18 of those, and 12 were conducted by his predecessor Captain Welch or others between 1943 and 1946. Captain O'Hara served the bulk of his time as master during the height of the war in Italy and Northwest Europe.

Now it was Captain Armit's turn. As of 21 Feb 1946, the matter of repatriating Canadian war brides and kin became his problem. It was expected that the backlog of war brides would not be cleared anytime soon. Authorities thought it would continue into August or September 1946. It was assumed that the backlog would be eased by the addition of *Lady Nelson* and *Lady Rodney*. The hospital ship *Letitia* was converted and subsequently added to the fleet.<sup>110</sup> It still wasn't enough!

More than 55,000 Army and Air Force personnel were to be brought home within four weeks that January. There were somewhere between 25,000 and 44,000 servicemen and women in England awaiting a return home. The *Queen Elizabeth* was brought into the fray to clear that backlog.

Two trips were scheduled; one 15 Jan and another 2 Feb to clear the backlog, carting more than 12,000 troops each time. The rate of two trips within 19 days was expected to clear the backlog, and that *Queen Elizabeth* would clear it all on her own by March that year. But there was no indication that she would remain available to do so. Over

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<sup>109</sup> Anon. **Capt Armit Named Nelson Commander**, *Globe and Mail*, 21 Feb 1945

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, *Globe and Mail*, 3 Jan 1946

225,000 from all services were eventually repatriated back to Canada between VE- Day and 31 Dec 1945.<sup>111</sup>

Now all that was left to do was reunite the war brides and families. The plan was simple. The Lady Nelson and Lady Rodney would carry between 200-300 war brides while Letitia 400 each trip. A train of ships was set up across the water on a schedule of three round trips per month until the backlog was cleared and the task completed.<sup>112</sup>



War brides en route to Canada aboard S.S. Letitia waving goodbye to families and friends.

Credit: Barney J. Gloster/Canada. Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada/PA-175794

It never went according to plan. Wives and children of Canadian Servicemen overseas were rushed to the Dominion in unprecedented numbers, but those numbers continued to grow. There were a number of new marriages. It was recorded during March 1946; some 3694 wives and 1272 children were transported to Canada. During that same

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, Globe and Mail, 3 Jan 1946

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, Globe and Mail, 3 Jan 1946

period however, 851 new marriages were performed with an additional 281 babies born of “earlier unions.”<sup>113</sup>

Col W.S. Murdock director of the bureau responsible for repatriations said; “At the present rate of progress we cannot hope to complete the movement of servicemen’s dependents before the end of the year.”

Still remaining in the United Kingdom were 24,334 wives and 8,810 children. Additionally, 15,931 women and 7,554 children were awaiting sailing on forthcoming drafts. It was quite the number to handle and it kept 300 servicemen and women engaged in the administration at the bureau to handle all the details. It wasn’t just a nine to five job. All worked considerable overtime in sorting out the priorities and dealing with the families.<sup>114</sup>

It took more ships to deal with it all. The fleet expanded to include Lady Nelson, Lady Rodney, Aquitania, Scythia, Letitia, Ile de France, and Mauretania. Mauretania remained in the fleet for only a very short time. She was eventually redirected to the repatriation of British Servicemen from India.<sup>115</sup>

Progress was slowly made. Some 39,000 brides and babies were transported safely to Canada by 11 June 1946. Col V.N. Gill then director of the Canadian Wives Bureau in London was especially proud of that record in which this was safely carried out with no loss of life. The Bureau had taken every precaution ensuring that families were conducted safely to Canada by matching services to family needs.

Mothers with young babies were matched to ships with lower bunks and baby cots, with up to date hospital facilities available. Large families were matched to ships that ensured every child was kept with the mother and had a bunk.<sup>116</sup>

This was a complicated task. Some families had six or more children, sometimes with a new baby in tow, that exacerbated the problems of repatriation. But it was done. It was also a factor that slowed the process down, but safety was paramount! It also created some inequities. Others were moved ahead in the queue displacing some priority families who were unable to be accommodated safely. It was all due to the lack of space that suited their needs.<sup>117</sup>

The task finally ended 1947-1948 when the last of 1338 war brides finally arrived in Canada. The biggest wave of immigration came in fiscal 1946. Thirty-nine thousand war brides and children arrived representing 55% of the total eventually transported to Canada.

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<sup>113</sup> Anon. **New Weddings Upset Schedule of Ocean Liners**, The Hamilton Spectator, 9 April 1946

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, The Hamilton Spectator, 9 April 1946

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, The Hamilton Spectator, 9 April 1946

<sup>116</sup> Anon., **39,000 Brides, Babies Shipped Without Illness**, Globe and Mail, 12 Jun 1946

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, Globe and Mail, 12 Jun 1946

It was an eclectic mix reflecting where Canadian soldiers had served. The lion's share came from Britain - 44,886, Holland - 1886, Belgium - 649, France - 26 and Denmark – 7.<sup>118</sup> All had to be repatriated from various locations using various means. It took time.

In the end, some 64,446 brides and children finally arrived in Canada. They had a huge influence as they made their way here, building a future, setting up house and home in their adopted country. The war brides fanned out far and wide across the country and their influence felt everywhere.<sup>119</sup>

All wasn't well and good though. Some war brides were homesick, families did break up, and some returned "home". But the vast majority stayed. To this day their direct influence was that perhaps one million Canadians can trace their heritage to Canada's war brides.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Anon. **Canada's war brides - Love and war overseas**, CBC News 3 Nov 2006

Source: <http://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/war-brides/>

Accessed: 18 Jun 2018

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, CBC News 3 Nov 2006

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, CBC News 3 Nov 2006

## 10. Captain Morris Osbourne O'Hara – Epilogue

Captain O'Hara's story is tied to the history, story and life of the ship, Lady Nelson. It was exceedingly difficult to find very much direct material pertaining to Captain O'Hara's legacy as its master. There was no direct reference to his role in his British Empire Medal (BEM) citation as it appeared to recognize solely his duties and service aboard the Nelson when sunk in St Lucia in March 1942.

The date of the BEM citation was 1943, predating his tenure as Captain of the Lady Nelson. Yet we know he was its Master from 1944 to 1946 in which he made 18 crossings as master.

Lady Nelson's arrivals in port were well documented. One would think Captain O'Hara would have frequently been mentioned somewhere along the way. The one photograph found as O'Hara as Master, came from the snippet of a story written by Frank Miller, True Son of the Sea, Halifax Chronicle Herald, 18 March 1950. Regrettably a full copy of his article was not available that may have held more clues.



Sometimes a picture paints a thousand words though. This photograph of Captain O'Hara taken at the helm of his ship, conveys both an impression of a humble man and a proud Master. He may have been one of those modest men who wished to avoid the spotlight.

Men and women of Canada's Merchant Marine were the unsung heroes of the Second World War. Their accomplishments were largely ignored by the press and they weren't feted by an appreciative or adoring public either. It may be one reason why it was so difficult to find any photographic evidence of Captain Morris in the public record.

It was said that "The reconstructed Lady Nelson was very fortunate in her assignments of Captain. One of the first Captains as a hospital ship was Captain Morris O'Hara, a native son of Isaac's Harbour, NS."

Felicity Hanington, wrote those words in her book "**The Lady Boats – The Life and times of Canada's West Indies Merchant Fleet**," in 1980. She sketched Captain Morris O'Hara's character as "Ample in frame, exasperating, loveable, sympathetic, and understanding; time meant little to him.' 'He was affectionately known as "Mo" and was well suited for his job as master of a hospital ship".<sup>121</sup>

That says a lot about Morris O'Hara, the person, and the respect, esteem, and affection held for him by his crew. He was decidedly a most reserved man. His duty lay with the safe return of the wounded. He cared little for protocol when it was a matter of the men's safety and comfort at heart.

Captain O'Hara cared not a fig for the necessities or sensibilities of some high officials awaiting his arrival in port. His first duty was to the wounded under his care. All that mattered to him was the safe conduct of the ship. Hanington wrote "He was immovable in that regard, there was always another day tomorrow."<sup>122</sup>

Moreover, Captain Morris Osbourne O'Hara was a brave man too. Lady Nelson was always under threat of air and naval attack. The Mediterranean alone was a significant and violent theatre of operations. He was without any means of defence for, as a designated hospital ship, he was forbidden weapons of any kind in order to remain under the protection of the Geneva Conventions.

Captain O'Hara was continuously in war zones, under fire, and was in Naples 1944 picking up wounded in the Italian campaign. He had to contend with matters of navigation from, to and in worn torn harbours, as well as sea lanes that were under constant threat from enemy hazards; such as, surface ships, aircraft, U-boats, mines, and other hazards.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 85

<sup>122</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 86

<sup>123</sup> Ibid Felicity Hanington and Captain Percy A. Kelly, 1980, pg. 86

Captain O'Hara sailed on 18 of 30 voyages that were true missions of mercy. He was responsible for 60% of the total effort and sailed nearly 200,000 nautical miles doing so. It was a singular accomplishment that saw many of Canada's wounded safely returned home to families and loved ones. It was a task accomplished under the most difficult of conditions. He was exposed at all times as hospital ships made all their voyages fully lit in order to identify themselves to submarines.<sup>124</sup>

It was a hazardous duty notwithstanding the rules of the Geneva Convention protecting them. One never knew what hazard or mischance would cross their paths thwarting that protection. Lady Nelson was fortunate to have avoided these.

It wasn't for lack of trying! "Hazards and Chance" existed a-plenty. Captain O'Hara experienced his fair share of these too while at sea. One time he was aboard a freighter with 10000 tons of grain bound for Cyprus. For the first time aboard ship, he was provided with a bed instead of a bunk. Rough weather pursued his crossing and he was continually tossed from the bed. He remedied that by sleeping in a chair on the bridge for the remainder of the voyage.

Another time he ran afoul of port authorities in Gibraltar. He had lost his passport and was about to be arrested as a fugitive from justice. A small Spanish boy saved the day by stepping in to explain to police what had happened.<sup>125</sup>

Lady Nelson was placed in harm's way often as witnessed by Howard Clark who joined the *Lady Nelson* in 1943. Clark made 17 crossings from Europe to Halifax, NS some of which in company with Captain O'Hara. He remembered sailing into Cherbourg in October and November 1944, then an active theatre of operations.

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<sup>124</sup> Howard Clark, *HMCS Lady Nelson*, Bedeque Area Historical Society, 2017

Source: <http://www.bedequemuseum.ca/hmcs-lady-nelson.html>

Accessed: 16 Jun 2018

<sup>125</sup> For Prosperity's Sake, Clipping undated/unidentified news source, "**Capt M O'Hara dies in Camp Hill**", June 1965 (obituary)

<http://www.forposterityssake.ca/JPGs/PHOTO-DIR/CTB-PHOTOS-5600/CTB007630.jpg>

Accessed: 29 Jul 2018



The Canadian hospital ship Lady Nelson leaving Cherbourg Harbour in October/November 1944.  
Roger Litwiller Collection, Arthur Singleton, RCNVR Photo, courtesy Doug Campbell, RCNVR. (RTL-DC040)

Clark recalled other memorable voyages in Lady Nelson with Captain O'Hara. One trip included a voyage via Jamaica and another just after the war via Hamburg, Germany. Dangers still lurked in all these waters even at peace for many hidden hazards remained.

Yet in spite of these; particularly Hamburg, Lady Nelson was always brought in close to the wounded to bring them home from a point closer on the front without undue delay.<sup>126</sup> Such was the nature of the man, his crew, and the tenor of the ship.

Canadians began reflecting on the major role their little towns played in the war as early as 1943. A terrible price was paid by their sons and daughters, who served so far away. It was a cost of lost loved ones, and in a legacy of pain and suffering of its wounded.<sup>127</sup> This sad legacy is shared by many communities.

The little hamlet of Isaac's Harbour along Nova Scotia's Atlantic coast on our eastern shores was no different. One son contributed mightily to the war effort in a unique way. Captain Morris O'Hara, in command of a hospital ship, the Lady Nelson, brought mercy to foreign shores. He returned safely home, to Canada, its sons and daughters at the height of the Second World War. That is a legacy worth remembering.

Captain Morris O'Hara, a distinguished son of Isaacs Harbour, born 25 Jul 1893, died June 1965 in his 72<sup>nd</sup> year at Camp Hill Hospital, Halifax, after a long illness. Captain O'Hara was wartime commander of the first Canadian hospital ship, the Lady Nelson, and is buried in Camp Hill Cemetery Halifax.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid Howard Clark, 2017

<sup>127</sup> Anon. **Little Towns of Canada Play Major Role in War**, The Hamilton Spectator, 12 Jun 1943



## **Acknowledgements Capt O'Hara and The Lady Nelson**

This article and history of Captain Morris O'Hara (Isaac's Harbour) and the CNS and Hospital Ship, Lady Nelson was made possible because of the help and assistance of following:

### **Individuals:**

Norma Cooke, Isaac's Harbour,  
Guðmundur Helgason, Uboat.net,  
Roger Litwiller, Canadian Naval Author/Historian,  
Gary Weir, For Prosperity's Sake, and

### **Organizations**

Canada Science and Technology Museum,  
Canadian War Museum, Democracy at War,  
Colchester Public Library- Stewiacke Branch (NS)  
Library and Archives Canada,  
Royal Canadian Medical Service Association,  
Veteran Affairs Canada  
Westport Public Library, Western Counties Regional Libraries (NS,)

I am forever deeply indebted to all for their encouragement, interlibrary loans, or use of their photographic/textual materials that brought this story to life without which, one part of Guysborough County's deep, rich, and vibrant history may have been lost.

A fully cited article is available at [madiganstories.com](http://madiganstories.com) for those more inclined to verify the sources that one day may lead to a historical adventure and personal discovery of their own.

