

NOTE

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Directorate of History  
National Defence Headquarters  
Ottawa, Canada  
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28  
31 May 41

The Loss of the S.S. "Nerissa".

DECLASSIFIED  
Authority: DHD 3-3  
by Clax for DHist NDHQ  
Date: NOV 13 1986

Canadian Military Headquarters,  
2 Cockspur Street, S.W.1,  
London, ENGLAND.

The Director,  
Historical Section,  
General Staff,  
National Defence Headquarters,  
Ottawa, CANADA.

1. A further report is submitted. This report deals with the loss of the S.S. "Nerissa", which was sunk by enemy action in the North Atlantic on the night of 30 Apr - 1 May 41 while carrying Canadian naval, military and air personnel to this country.
2. This episode is of special interest from two points of view. This is believed to be the first occasion, either in this war or the last, when Canadian soldiers have lost their lives by enemy action at sea while in transit to this country, although the number of troops transported must now approach 500,000. Moreover, the loss of the "Nerissa" occasioned the largest loss of life sustained by the Canadian Army in any single incident of this war to the present time, surpassing by a considerable margin the losses caused by the enemy air attack on LONDON on the night of 16-17 Apr 41 (dealt with in my previous reports Nos. 24 and 25).

NARRATIVE OF LT.-COL. SMITH

3. The senior surviving officer of the Canadian Army from the "Nerissa" was Lt.-Col. G.C. SMITH (CANADIAN ARMoured CORPS, late R.C.H.A.) who arrived in LONDON on the night of 4 May 41. On 6 May 41 I had an extended interview with Lt.-Col. Smith, and he told me the story of the disaster, to the following effect.

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4. The "Nerissa" was the property of the Furness-Withy Line and was built for the Newfoundland service. She was a small vessel, of about 5,000 tons (I have had no opportunity of discovering the exact figure) and capable of a speed which Lt.-Col. Smith believed to be 13 knots but which the report of her Chief Officer (appended hereto) indicates as 14. She had made previous similar trans-Atlantic voyages, for Major F.G. BIRD, R.C.E., lately on duty at C.M.H.Q., tells me that he crossed to this country on her.

5. On her last voyage the "Nerissa" sailed from HALIFAX, N.S., on 21 Apr 41 and called at ST. JOHN'S, Newfoundland, en route to the United Kingdom. In addition to service personnel she carried a number of civilians. Among the latter were some women and children; none of these survived the subsequent disaster. The O.C. Troops on board was Lt.-Col. K.C. BURNES, P.P.C.L.I., who was proceeding to England to take up the appointment of G.S.O. 1, H.Q. Cdn Base Units.

6. The "Nerissa" was making an independent unescorted sailing. The only escort which she received was that afforded by a Coastal Command plane on the last two days of the voyage (29 and 30 April).

7. The attack upon her took place (see Chief Officer's report) in Lat. 55-57 N., Long. 10-08 W.; she was then approximately 120 miles out from LAUGH FOYLE. At this time, Lt.-Col. Smith states, her passengers had already begun to feel that the worst danger of the passage was over, and some of them had ceased to carry their lifebelts with them. The attack occurred soon after 2230 hrs on 30 Apr 41.

8. The ship was struck by three torpedoes. The time of the first explosion is fixed by Lt.-Col. Smith at about 2232 hrs, while the Chief Officer, it will be noted, places it at 2234 hrs.

9. At this time Lt.-Col. Smith was playing bridge in the lounge. When the explosion took place all the ship's lights immediately

went out, but the crew soon had a certain number of dim auxiliary lights in operation. Lt.-Col. Smith made his way to his cabin, woke his cabin-mate (who had slept through the explosion, and who was subsequently lost) and then went on deck, carrying with him a baby belonging to an English civilian family. Once on deck, the child's father took it from him. This whole family were lost.

10. On the boat-deck Lt.-Col. Smith found the ship's commander (whose name was WATSON) superintending the launching of the boats. There was "no yelling" and no serious confusion, and all personnel were doing their duty coolly. The explosion of the torpedo had smashed Nos. 5 and 6 boats. The captain got No. 1 down into the water and told Lt.-Col. Smith to get No. 3 away. Lt.-Col. Smith got this boat ready for lowering, and Captain Watson then came over to it and gave the order to "lower away".

11. Immediately after this the second torpedo struck with a tremendous explosion. A soldier who was holding the lines at one end of the boat was shocked into letting go; the boat was up-ended and its passengers thrown into the sea, or into No. 1 boat.

12. The ship, which up to this time had been settling gradually, now began to sink very rapidly, and although there was still no panic, people began to rush to save themselves. There was a rope-ladder nearby and the captain told Lt.-Col. Smith to climb down it. He did so, and in this way entered No. 1 boat. He did not see the captain again; presumably he went down with the vessel.

13. Just after Lt.-Col. Smith got into the boat, the third torpedo struck the "Nerissa". This, he believes, was about half a minute after the second explosion. The shock caused the ship to make "a tremendous lurch" which caused a great wave. This wave upset No. 1 boat. The boat was perhaps somewhat overcrowded, but Lt.-Col. Smith has no doubt that it was the wave that caused this particular disaster. The report of the Chief Officer states



that the cause was the manner in which passengers and crew on the starboard side (or in No. 3 boat ?) were flung into No. 1 boat when the second torpedo struck; but Lt.-Col. Smith tells me that the Chief Officer was stunned when people were thrown into No. 1 boat on top of him, and therefore is not a reliable witness concerning immediately subsequent events.

14. Lt.-Col. Smith (who was wearing a lifebelt) came to the surface under the overturned boat. He extricated himself and then found himself on the side of the boat away from the ship, which was just about to sink.

15. The "Nerissa" sank in about four minutes from the time of the first explosion. Lt.-Col. Smith was told by someone who claimed to have noted the times that the exact period was 3 minutes 58 seconds; but in any event he feels certain that the time was not more than five minutes. He consulted his watch in the lounge a couple of minutes before the first torpedo struck, and the time was then 2230 hrs. His watch stopped at 2236 hrs, which was presumably the moment at which he was thrown into the water.

16. His impression is that the ship went down "absolutely straight", i.e., without taking a list. The Chief Officer, on the contrary, reports that she listed heavily to starboard before sinking stern first. Lt.-Col. Smith states that, contrary to a story which he has heard circulating, the ship's oil fuel did not catch fire. There was no light whatever. Lt.-Col. Smith saw no submarine, and though some of the survivors thought they saw one he is inclined to put this down to imagination.

17. Lt.-Col. Smith now spent some time swimming about in the vicinity of the capsized boat, assisting some survivors to reach it and searching for more. He heard Major Stuart FRENCH calling to his wife, who had been in the boat with him, and searched for her for some time, but without success.

18. A raft now came in sight, and seeing that it was less crowded than the boat, to the bottom of which many people were clinging, Lt.-Col. Smith swam towards it. While doing so he came across an American "ferry pilot" floundering in the water. This man was "raving mad" and Lt.-Col. Smith believes that he had been wounded, though in the darkness it was difficult to be certain. Although he was very large and heavy, Lt.-Col. Smith got him to the raft and another American pilot pulled them both aboard. The injured man died about a quarter of an hour later. As the raft was now itself overcrowded, those upon it, after making quite sure that the man was dead, and taking his papers, put the body into the sea.

19. There were now 18 persons on the raft, including the ship's Chief Officer, who was in command and whose conduct was highly praiseworthy. The sea was relatively smooth and the water, fortunately, not very cold. The party knew that an S.O.S. had been successfully despatched and that therefore there was good hope of rescue.

20. Two of the "Merissa's" six serviceable boats were still right side up, and three were floating upside down. Lt.-Col. Smith is not certain what became of the sixth, but he thinks that No. 3 boat may not have got away from the ship. There were also two rafts, including the one already mentioned.

21. At first light - about 0430 hrs - a Coastal Command plane appeared, dived down towards the survivors, signalled to them and then flew off. About an hour later a destroyer was sighted a long distance away. This was H.M.S. "Veteran". It was feared that she would not see them; but the plane now re-appeared and directed the destroyer to the area where the boats and rafts were floating. The "Veteran" was shortly joined by another destroyer, H.M.S. "Hunter". The latter, however, did not pick up any of the survivors. This was done by the "Veteran"; she did

not lower boats, but pulled the rescued men directly on board. Lt.-Col. Smith was picked up at about 0715 hrs. It will be noticed that the times which he gives for this phase differ materially from those given by the Chief Officer.

22. At the time when the destroyers heard the "Merissa's" S.O.S. they were in harbour preparing to sail on convoy duty. Being unable to proceed to the rescue without orders they sailed at 0100 hrs in accordance with their previous instructions; but at 0200 hrs they received orders to pick up the survivors. By that time they were already well on their way towards the spot. (These times Lt.-Col. Smith believes to be English Summer Time, one hour in advance of Greenwich Mean Time; times previously given are ship's time, which the Chief Officer's report indicates as being G.M.T.)

23. H.M.S. "Veteran" provided the rescued men with blankets and an issue of rum and dried their clothes, and carried the party back to LOUGH FOYLE, where they were transferred to H.M.S. "Kingscup" which took them on to LONDONDERRY. After some initial delay (due to no notice having been given that there were soldiers among the survivors) the Military personnel were taken to EBRINGTON BARRACKS, where they were treated with the greatest kindness and given a hot meal at 2230 hrs (1 May). The next day an emergency issue of clothing was made to them; and late in the afternoon of 3 May those who could travel left for England. Nine Canadian Army personnel were left in hospital at LONDONDERRY. The rest of the party (two Canadian officers, one Norwegian officer, and 23 Canadian other ranks) proceeded by train to BELFAST, where they were rejoined by Lt.-Col. Smith who had preceded them that morning; and that night (3-4 May) the party crossed by steamer to HEYSHAM. The next day (a Sunday) they moved on by train towards LIVERPOOL.

24. Their troubles, however, were not all over, for MERSEYSIDE had just suffered a series of heavy and persistent air raids (see

my Report No. 27). All transport and communication facilities had been temporarily disrupted, and for some time Lt.-Col. Smith could not make contact with the officers from C.M.H.Q. who had gone north to meet his party. However, with the aid of officers of the CANADIAN BASE DEPOT (LORNE SCOTS), the party finally reached its destination in LIVERPOOL and caught the afternoon train for LONDON, arriving here at 2230 hrs that night (4 May 41). The other ranks of the party were sent on to BORDON.

25. Lt.-Col. Smith mentioned that the military personnel on the "Nerissa" included three stowaways who had deserted from their units in the hope of seeing active service in the United Kingdom. One of these men was lost; he was Serjeant F.J. McGOVERN, C.M.S.C., who had been personal clerk to Brigadier EARNSHAW, O.C. Troops in Newfoundland, and came aboard when the ship touched at ST. JOHN'S.

26. A copy of the report of Joseph GAFFNEY, the "Nerissa's" Chief Officer, is on file at C.M.H.Q. A copy of this carbon copy is attached hereto as "Appendix "A".

#### CANADIAN ARMY CASUALTIES

27. As indicated in para. 23, above, the total number of Canadian Army personnel who survived the "Nerissa" disaster was 35: 3 officers and 32 other ranks, including the two surviving stowaways (Gunners J.S. HOLT, P4641, and C. GALLAGHER, P4488, both now on the strength of No. 8 Cdn Artillery Holding Unit in this country). The two officers who survived in addition to Lt.-Col. Smith were Lieuts. R.G. PAUL, R.C.A.P.C., and R.R. PITHART, R.C.A.

28. The total number of Canadian Army personnel lost was 73: 13 officers and 60 other ranks. The list of those "unreported" was published in Canadian newspapers on 6 May 41, and I have before me the list as printed on that date in the Vancouver Daily Province. I have checked this ~~as far as possible~~ <sup>important</sup> against sources available at C.M.H.Q. without finding any error. The above total given as lost does not include one Auxiliary Services supervisor,



Mr. J.N. MacNEIL, who is also missing. The corps suffering most heavily was the COMPS OF MILITARY STAFF CLERKS, which lost 33 other ranks; next comes the ROYAL CANADIAN ARMY MEDICAL CORPS, which lost 3 officers and 5 other ranks.

29. The officers lost were as follows (names from Court of Inquiry's nominal roll):

R.C.A.	Captain G.D. MORROW
	" J.R. TOWNSHEND (spelt "TOWSHEND" in above nominal roll; but Newspaper list and Defence Forces List (Nov 1939, p. 224) indicate name as here given).
P.P.C.L.I.	Lt.-Col. K.C. BURNESS
CARLETON AND YORK REGT.	Lieut. J.A. TRITES
	" T.E. MITCHELL
NEW BRUNSWICK RANGERS	" Y.T. PARCETT
SAINT JOHN FUSILIERS (M.G.)	Captain G.M. HARRINGTON
R.C.A.M.C.	Captain W.H. EMBREE
	" J.W. KIPPEN
R.C.A.P.C.	Lieut. S. PARK
	Captain G.T. CHATWIN
	Lieut. J.M. POULANGER
	" M.R.A. AMOS

30. The loss of Lt.-Col. BURNESS in particular will be a serious one. Officers who crossed with me on the "Capetown Castle", and who had lately been associated with him at R.M.C., KINGSTON, where he was Chief Instructor, spoke of him as being in their opinion one of the most brilliant soldiers in the Canadian service.

#### COURT OF INQUIRY

31. A Court of Inquiry to inquire into the sinking of the "Nerissa" assembled at BORDON on 7 May 41, presided over by Col. A.W. BEAMENT, Commandant, "B" Group Holding Units, C.A. The Court met during 7 and 8 May, reconvened on 15 May, and dated its findings 17 May. These findings, and a transcript of the testimony, will be found in C.M.H.C. file 15/Pers. Cas/1 ("Casualties - Personnel

Canada to U.K."), along with other documents relating to the disaster. They will be an important source of information for the Official Historian.

32. The Court, in a separate supplementary opinion (see same file) suggested that the whole question of life saving equipment and precautions on the "Merissa" should be investigated by competent authority. The Court expressed the view that such an investigation might reveal the desirability in future of the following measures being taken on vessels carrying troops:

- (i) Periodical lowering of boats to the water to ensure that the falls are in free running order. (The "Merissa's" boats had not been so lowered for a long period, and there were some difficulties with the gear.)
- (ii) Provision of some method of holding drainage plugs securely in place in lifeboats, or of an improved valve-type plug. (Evidence indicated that the plugs were out of some boats when they struck the water, or were driven out by the impact as a result of coming down with a run.)
- (iii) Training of all Service personnel aboard ships in method of releasing and lowering lifeboats. (Owing probably to casualties caused by the first explosion, many of the crew members told off for this duty did not appear at their stations, and military personnel had to carry on; cf. para. 11, above.)

33. The evidence taken by the Court indicates the extreme difficulty of discovering exactly what happened in an episode of this sort, for there are many disagreements and discrepancies. Not all the witnesses examined remembered hearing three explosions. Some believed that there were only two torpedoes; some reported that the second and third explosions were almost simultaneous.

34. On reading the evidence, I noticed a discrepancy between Lt.-Col. SMITH's evidence and his story as related to me. I quote

the passage from the Court record:

I went down the rope ladder into No. 1 boat. It was not over-crowded. Just as I got into the boat the "Nerissa" seemed to settle and a terrific wave came from the ship and upset our lifeboat. I was thrown into the water along with the others. I then swam around a little, after having gone down some distance. Just as I came up to the surface the third explosion took place and the ship leaped into the air and disappeared completely.

I called the discrepancy between this and the version in para. 13 (above) to Lt.-Col. Smith's attention, and he tells me the extract just quoted gives the facts as he actually remembers them; that is, the "terrific wave" was caused not by the third torpedo explosion, but by the ship settling. He is definite on the point that he was in the water when the third explosion took place. He has no doubt that there were three torpedoes.

35. With reference to para. 4 (above) I notice that in his evidence before the Court the Chief Officer stated the size of the "Nerissa" as "about 5,500 tons".

36. While the present report obviously does not exhaust the possibilities of this incident, it is believed that it contains the most essential facts. It will provide the Official Historian with a contemporary summary of the matter and will indicate the whereabouts of more complete sources. It may also provide him with a few facts not otherwise available.

C.S.

(C.P. Stacey) Major,  
Historical Officer, C.M.H.Q.

POSTSCRIPT. / On searching for the Chief Officer's Report (Appendix "A") to make a final check of the accuracy of the copy hereto appended, I am unable to discover the present whereabouts of C.M.H.Q.'s carbon copy, which was returned by me to A.A.G. (Pers.) but is not on the file referred to in para. 31 (above).

C.S.



COPY

## Actual Position:

(55-57 N.)  
(10-08 W.)

Report taken from Joseph Gaffney, Chief Officer on board s.s. "NERISSA" and David Baines Freeman, Extra 2nd Officer, s.s. "NERISSA".

N.F. ?  
C.S.

The vessel was on voyage from St. Johns N.B. for Liverpool. At 19.15 G.M.T. on the 30th April, 1941 the Lockheed Hudson escorting planes left the vessel at 20.00 D.B. Freeman relieved the Chief Officer, as officer of the watch, the watchkeepers now being the Master, the Extra Second Officer and Pay Sub. Lieutenant Ledsham, R.C.N.V.R., course of ship 107°, speed 14 knots, mainstead of advance 86.5% of 14 knots, ship doing zigzag number 18 (D.M.S.) the zigzag time being approximately 15 minutes fast of G.M.T. At 2125 star observations were taken, resulting in a position 56 degrees 01' N. and 10 degrees 52' W. After completing calculations from 3 stars the officer of the watch went up to the conning bridge to inform the Master that the vessel was 11 miles south, and a few minutes east of dead reckoning position, necessitating an alteration of course to 102°. Conversation took place at 2215, when the Master was asked to approve the suggested alteration at 2245 to the new course of 102 degrees as the ship would then be on the mean line of advance zigzag. Having descended to the chartroom to check positions and suggested alterations, the Master returned to the Conning bridge, giving his consent at approximately 2230. At 2234 a violent explosion occurred below the water line at a point in the hull on the starboard side directly below No. 3 and No. 5 lifeboats. No torpedo track was observed from the conning bridge.

The officer of the watch proceeded to give the alarm on the whistle and the electric bells. These were out of order, however, through causes [causes?] believed to lie in the engine room on account of the explosion (N.B. the vessel appeared to stop dead in her track on being struck by the torpedo.) The officer of the watch then proceeded to rouse the 2nd Officer and cadet and thence to the radio room to check transmission of distress signal, and thereupon to the portside boat deck to supervise the lowering of the boats. During the process of slipping grips and lowering the rails on port side, a second and third torpedo struck the vessel in way of No. 4 hatch on starboard side, practically simultaneously. The third torpedo according to reports from A. Strickland third class steward in charge of poop lifeboat No. 7 apparently caused the ammunition locker to explode. After the third explosion the ship settled stern first in the water, listing heavily to starboard.

Immediately after the first explosion boats stations were taken by passengers and crew, everything being properly organized and proceeding calmly.

Chief Officer Gaffney reports that it was his watch below but immediately on the first explosion he went up on deck to receive orders from the Master. At 2235 the Master gave orders to abandon ship and Gaffney immediately commenced to clear away the [boats?] on the starboard side. Having got No. 1 boat in the water with a full complement of passengers and crew, the second explosion took place, followed immediately by a third, causing the ship to list heavily to starboard. In consequence of this the afterfall of the No. 5. boat carried away and the boat fell down hanging by the forward fall and striking No. 1 boat. The passengers and crew remaining on the starboard side were literally flung into No. 1 boat and thereby capsizing it.



No. 7 poop lifeboat got clear of the ship with 35 survivors. No. 1 lifeboat was full but as state was capsized. 51 others managed to clamber on to rafts and upturned boats.

As regards Confidential Books etc. it is reported that the W/T codes were locked in Wireless room and went down with the ship, all other confidential documents including route instructions were placed in a weighted bag by the second officer and thrown overboard and seemed to sink.

The last that was seen of the vessel was about four or five minutes after the explosion when she sank stern first.

It is also reported that there were three Canadian soldier stowaways on board who were found three days after leaving St. Johns. These were placed under upon [open?] arrest and 1 is believed to have perished.

At about 0500 on the 1st May a plane flew over the vicinity and lights were flashed. At dawn a Whitley aeroplane came over and recognised the survivors, flashing O.K. and at 0900 on the same day all the 84 survivors were picked up by H.M.S. Veteran.

On behalf of all the survivors the above Officers express their deepest appreciation of the extreme courtesy and kindness extended to them by the Commanding Officer, all the Officers and crew of H.M.S. Veteran and also the Commanding Officer, Officers and crew of H.M.S. Kingcup, to which they were subsequently transferred and landed in Londonderry.

(sgd) J. GAFFNEY c/o.

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Note from N.C.S.O. Londonderry.

Pay Sub/Lieutenant H.C. Ledsham R.C.N.V.R. reports that four large sealed envelopes which were handed to him by the Accountant Officer of the H.M.C.S. "Stadacona" at Halifax, N.S. for delivery to H.M.C.S. "Niobe" at Devonport, and believed to contain examination papers, were lost with the ship.

A suggestion has been put forward by the Chief Officer and Extra Second Officer of the s.s. "NERISSA" that it might be better if life saving rafts were not slung on the rigging but laid on top of the hatches, being lashed only in case of bad weather, and furthermore that the equipment of the rafts be if possible lashed to the sides and not put inside the rafts.

(unsigned)

Lieutenant R.N.V.R.  
for N.C.S.O.