



# Heritage Notes

No. 3

January 1993

## "RESCUED BY GALLANT FISHERMEN..."<sup>1</sup>

### Jean Kyte

"I couldn't believe we were 25 to 30 minutes"<sup>2</sup>, was the comment of Ed Levy afterwards, in describing the rescue of the crew of the United States subchaser SC-709 which went aground on a bar in Louisbourg Harbour in a blizzard in wartime January 1943.

The rescue on January 22, 1943 by Louisbourg fishermen in the shallow-draft W.G. and by four crewmembers of the barquentine ANGELUS ended a nightmare of cold and exhaustion for the crew of the SC-709, dogged by bad weather, danger of capsizing by ice formation and subsequent equipment breakdown, and stranding on a bar in Louisbourg Harbour, followed by twenty-four hours of freezing misery in sight of land.

The S.C. 709 was commissioned at Elizabeth City, North Carolina November 16, 1942 and ordered on January 16, 1943 to proceed "in company with the U.S.C.G. STORIS to another United States Base."<sup>3</sup> It proceeded to Portland, Maine, and then left on January 18 for Argentia, Nfld.

The "Finding of Facts"<sup>4</sup> tersely catalogs the sequence of events leading up to the grounding: "...USCG STORIS lost contact January 19, 1943... Radar went out of commission same day ...began to ice up January 20 and ice kept under control ...radio and sound gear out of commission January 20 ...ice formed rapidly on ship 0100Q January 21 ...ice beyond control at 0755Q January 21, and ship carried estimated list of 25 degrees to port ...ship engulfed in ice 1100Q January 21 ...land sighted 1122Q January 21 ...ship took estimated 50 degrees list to port and would not answer to helm 1126Q ...ship grounded with estimated 50 degree list 1131Q January 21, 1943 ...grounding due to SC-709 being unmanageable as to steering because of heavy icing beyond control on approach to Louisburg Harbor, Nova Scotia.

The official U.S. Navy report records the grim battle with the Atlantic "...Prior to midnight (January 20) ice commenced to form with

such speed that all hands (available) were ordered to chip ice. The ice was of a soft nature making chipping with any haste impossible ...the deck, particularly along the port side, was covered with about a foot of ice ...the bridge ports save two being completely

covered ...the crew was becoming physically exhausted and the temperature was well below zero (F). Before an area could be cleared enough to see anything of the ship proper, the previously chipped area would be filled in again. Chipping teams were established, two men working from five to ten minutes. Sleep was impossible and the cold sandwiches of cheese and meat couldn't be kept on the stomach."<sup>5</sup>

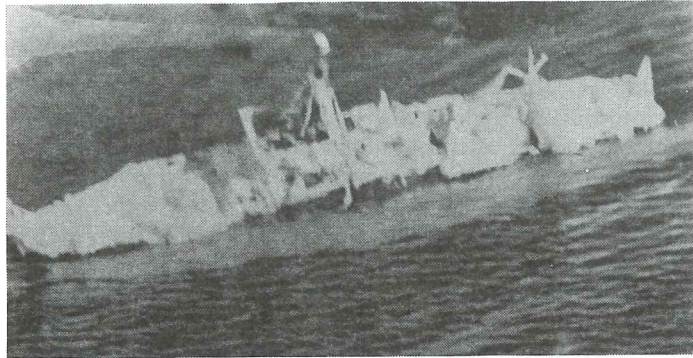
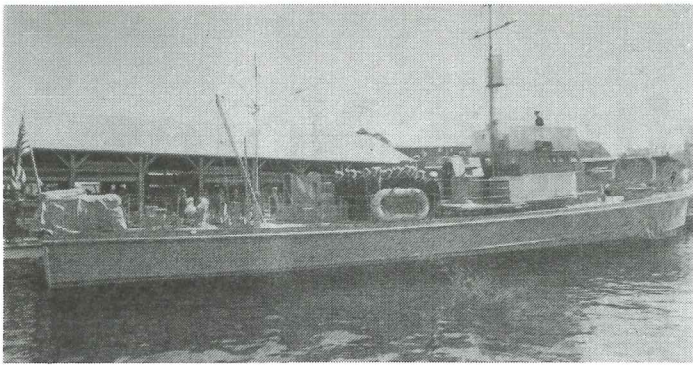
At 0504 Chief Boatswain's Mate George Gagnon, a 23-year Navy veteran, was washed overboard... "I was on the starboard side aft by the wherry chipping ice when a large wave from port came over and washed me overboard and by sheer luck, I grabbed and held to life line and pulled myself back aboard and continued to chip ice when the Commanding Officer noticed my condition and ordered me below to the engineering next to the heating boiler and to change into dry clothes and was given medical attention by the ships cook who was then acting as Pharmacist because of his experience in first aid."<sup>6</sup> (Gagnon later lost some toes).



Walter Boudreau of the Angelus



Top left to right: Ed. Levy, Charles Bagnell, Joe Bagnell, Nelson Bagnell, Earl Lewis and Wilbert Goyette



Above: The newly-commissioned SC-709, 16 November 1942.. Below: The iced-over SC 709 aground on the bar in Louisbourg in January 1943.

Between 0321 and 0410 Ensign Albert Jordan, acting as the engineer officer, and gunner's mate Tom Steffen succeeded in clearing the depth charge projectors and fired them.<sup>7</sup> Ammunition was moved to starboard and amidships, but the ship still listed 5 to 10 degrees.<sup>8</sup> The ice buildup continued and from Egg Island on, navigation was by dead reckoning.<sup>9</sup>

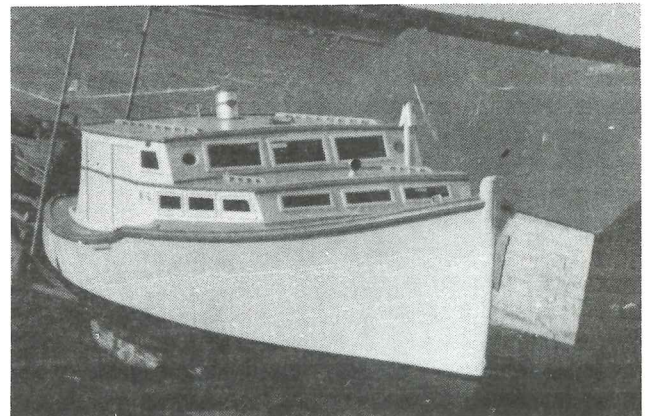
At 0755 January 21 the course was changed for Louisbourg ...ice continued to form ...all hands were wet through and physically exhausted. Visibility at sunrise was estimated at 500 yards, the sea at force 8 and the wind about 50 miles an hour. At 0900 the ice was beyond control, and the decision was made to beach the ship. At 1100 general visibility had closed to 300 yards, but at 1122 through a brief lift in the storm, a single church was observed. (It was Stella Maris Roman Catholic Church to the west of the town of Louisbourg.) A few minutes later another quick view was had of several ships and some rocks in what appeared to be a harbor. At 1126 the ship took a 50 degree list to port due to the ice. The Captain tried several courses to clear the rocks but the ship, now a floating iceberg (she was covered from bow to stern with about 55 to 60 tons of ice, according to Yeoman Peter Federspiel and Boatswain's Mate George Gagnon) and would not respond to the efforts of the three men on the wheel. At 1131 the SC-709 struck the bar between Battery Island and Rochefort Pt. at the mouth of the harbour at Louisbourg. All hands were ordered topside with life jackets,<sup>10</sup> and the ships' confidential papers were brought to the wheelhouse. The late Melvin Huntington, then Mayor of the town, noted in his diary: "Cloudy and very cold with northwest gale - light drizzle of snow at times during the day. One of the most unpleasant days a person could imagine. Min. tem. 9 below, max. temperature 2 above zero."<sup>11</sup>

Visibility was very poor but the Pilot Station at Kennelly's

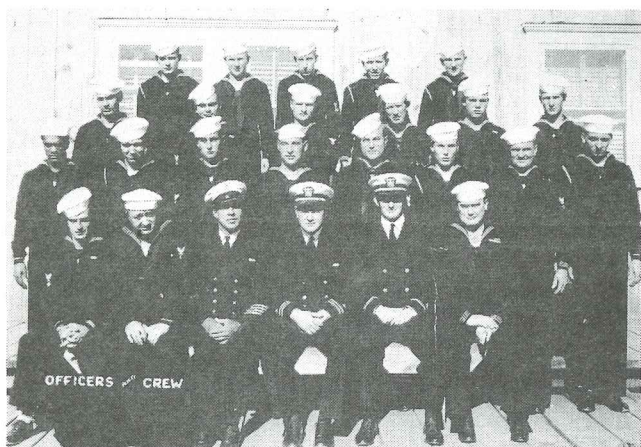
Point in Louisbourg had noted the ice-coated vessel and alerted the Canadian Navy,<sup>12</sup> whose office had just been established in Louisbourg on January 19. "Shortly a small harbor craft (it was the H.C. 34 under C.P.O. Paul Chaisson, now retired in Sydney) challenged and was advised of the vessel's identity and situation including the fact that two of the crew needed immediate medical attention".<sup>13</sup> The HC-34 went out with a pilot, but was ordered back because she drew too much water to get close to the SC-709. Meantime, Hyacinthe Pottie, on a navy craft, "could see them clinging to the deck, but we couldn't reach them with the high seas. We couldn't even get a line on her."<sup>14</sup> This was confirmed by the U.S. Navy report " ...during this time the majority of the crew were huddled in the pilot house (of the ship) ...during the late part of the afternoon, the Commanding Officer ordered all hands out of the pilot house because it appeared that the vessel might capsize to port<sup>15</sup> ...Many line rockets were fired but never once did they get close enough."<sup>16</sup> Prior to this time all available gear for protection-blankets, pillows, mattresses - had been brought up from below on the SC-709. The men spent another miserable night on the wreck, while frustration rose in Louisbourg.

January 22nd was "cold and mostly clear with occasional light squalls. Fresh northwest wind, min. temp. 2 (F), max tem. 16 (F)."<sup>17</sup> Earl Lewis, Fisheries Inspector at Louisbourg, recalls, "I do remember the day very clearly as we could see the spar or spars of the wreck once in a while sticking out of the mist that hung over the water due to the low temperature, and sometime that morning it was obvious that what attempts were made were in no way going to solve the problem".<sup>18</sup> Charlie Bagnell remembered, "Those men had been out there all night, all day til 10 o'clock in the morning. With the vapour flying, sometimes you could see the ship and sometimes you couldn't. ...Those men were freezing to death. Something had to be done."<sup>19</sup> Something was. The fishermen went out and rescued the crew from the SC-709.

L.H. Cann, owner-manager of a ship repair shop on the waterfront, and Earl Lewis, met with fishermen Charles, Nelson and Joseph Bagnell (brothers), Ed Levy and Wilbert Goyetche, who had a shallow-draft vessel, the W.G., which he used as a pilot boat and to deliver stores to ships for Lewis & Company. Meantime, Captain Edward Jensen of Lunenburg, of the barquentine ANGELUS, and his crew, were aware of the plight of the stricken ship as well.



The W.G., Wilbert Goyetche's, shallow-draft vessel



"So we got out and over the bar and it was just a mess of white foam. First time we went over, we rounded up, we couldn't make it, we had to make a second circle. The crew were all standing on the deck, and were they ever cold ...they couldn't straighten out their hands." (Charles Bagnell).<sup>23</sup> "Charlie's brother Joe was on the bow of her (the W.G.) and he threw a rope up a couple of times and they couldn't ...the men were too frozen that they couldn't move ...by and by he got a gaff and he gaffed it. The rope went in over the rail ...and Joe gaffed it back and held it, held the end of it. ...Oh, man, dear, if you'd seen the mess those men were in. ...Some with their bare feet, some with shoes on, almost all had bare hands ...Some had socks on their feet..." "When they rolled over the side of the boat and came down into the boat ...and Joe and Nelson and Earl Lewis and you, Charlie, were at it too, ...and they'd take them over the side ...the boat (the W.G.) was up quite high...they'd let themselves go. You'd grab them and pull them in the boat. ...The good ones helped the bad ones, see. The worse ones we took down forward. And the ones that could stand up - there were a couple of them .. we left them stand back in the back part of the boat."<sup>24</sup> They took off the remaining eighteen men.

Officers and Crew of the SC 709 in 1942. Front Row: l-r, Harry W. Luessen, QM2c, USN; Dayton J. Muckle, SC2c, USNR; George Gagnon, CBM (PA), USN; Lt. William C. French, Jr., D-V(G), USNR; Ensign Albert D. Jordan, D-V(G), USNR; Peter Federspiel, Yeo1c, USN. 2nd Row Tom H. James, Matt 3c, USNR; Raymond K. Baird, S1c, USNR; Theodore J. Riedlinger, SM2c, USN; George L. Wenz, MM2c, USNR; Francis C. Patsey, EM1c, USNR; Willie Counts, S1c, USNR; William A. Dedrick, MoMM1c, USNR; Frank W. Ormsby, Sealc, USNR. 3rd Row: Heavingston; Tom B. Steffen, GM2c, USN; ( the third man, Owens, did not sail to Louisbourg, he left the ship in Portland and was replaced by Bruce R. Simmons, MoMM1c USNR); Harry J. Dearing, MM1c, USNR; Edwin L. McInnis, Jr., MoMM1c, USN; Donald L. Franklin, MoMM2c, USN. 4th Row: Joseph R. French, SOM3c, USNR; Walter P. Davis, Jr., RM3c, USNR; Stanley F. Bazarek, S1c, USNR; Geno Ferrante, Cox, USN; Everett V. Trzcinski, Sealc, USNR.



Ensign Jordan's report to the U.S. Navy Inquiry put the rescue this way: "Just as things looked blackest, two dories came alongside to receive personnel. These made two trips carrying eight men to the ships standing by when a fishing boat manned by Edward Levy, Nelson Bagnell, Charles Bagnell, Joseph Bagnell and Wilbert Goyetche came across the bar through an opening ...their motorboat took us off the ship."<sup>20</sup>

The first dory to reach the ship was manned by four crewmembers of the ANGELUS: Walter Boudreau, Moncton, N.B. and Clarence Mullins, John Hillier and Alex Holmans, of Belleorum, Newfoundland. They had to smash the ice with their oars to get the door open to the pilot house where the crew was huddled.<sup>21</sup>

The Louisbourg fishermen called on Capt. Jack Savory of the DOSCO tug, "ASCUPART" to lead the W.G. through the ice to get close to the SC-709. "She was wide and our boat was only narrow and we went in behind her, kept right up tight to the stern. And we went out, over the bar, where they said no boat could go. Well, ...I'd go and Joe Bagnell'd go, Nelson used to go out through there every day when we were lobster fishing. It's not a very wide space."<sup>22</sup>

Ladies of the Navy League: l-r Mrs. Fred Kyte, Mrs. Catherine Lewis, Mrs. Elda MacKinnon, Mrs. Norma Covey, Miss Blanche Cross, Mrs. Miriam Cameron, Mr. D. H. Gibson, Dom. Pres., Navy League of Canada, Mrs. Ruby Stewart (partially obscured), Mrs. Jennie MacDonald, Mrs. Eva Lewis, Miss Hattie MacDonald ( Public Health Nurse), Mrs. Weir Martell, Mrs. Annie Dickson, Mr. John M. MacLeod, Sydney Allied Merchant Seaman's Club, Sydney. Opening of the Louisbourg Navy League on January 6, 1942.

The ASCUPART, standing by, then led the W.G. back to the wharf, with the HC-34 patrolling to help break the ice, and the men were taken at once to the Navy League Hut, where townswomen, alerted, had set up an emergency hospital ward. Under Mrs. Catherine Lewis, R.N., and Mrs. Weir Martell, R.N., a team comprised of Mrs. Miriam Cameron, Mrs. Norma Covey, Mrs. Annie Dickson, Mrs. Sadie Dowling, Mrs. Retha Jewell, Mrs. Winnie Kyte, Mrs. Eva Lewis, Mrs. Bessie Mounce, Mrs. Alberta Stevens, R.N., Mrs. Ruby Stewart, Mrs. "Jimmy Ned" Townsend and Mrs. Laura Wil-

cox, R.N., gently removed the iced clothes, bathed the men in warm water, patted circulation back into frozen limbs, wrapped the men in blankets and fed them hot soup and coffee, brought to the Navy Hut by sons and daughters from homes in town. "It was the first hot food and coffee since our departure the previous Monday," commented Ensign Jordan... (we were) hospitalized at the Sydney Military Hospital, Sydney, Nova Scotia." (then on Royal Ave.) "Excellent and efficient care was taken of us, though we were then too spent to care much."<sup>25</sup>

Salvage operations were undertaken the next day. Ed Levy and the men, still using the W.G., took a group of government and naval officials out and removed some of the equipment. In the weeks following, H.W. Luessen, QM2c, U.S. Navy, who was a crew-member of the SC-709, supervised the removal of other equipment. It was rumoured that an attempt would be made to salvage the ship, but another storm blew up and the ship was pounded to pieces. The wreck could be seen for some years until finally the sea claimed her completely.

Ed Levy, Nelson and Joe Bagnell and Wilbert Goyetche continued with their fishing, Charles Bagnell became a railwayman with the local S & L Railway Co. and a town councillor, and Earl Lewis became a fish plant manager. Capt. Jack Savory continued on the DOSCO tug ASCUPART, whose crew were Sandy Matheson, Clyde Lewis, Dan MacDougall, Gordon Troke, Chief Engineer Arthur Martell, engineer Galley, and Wilfred LeBlanc.

The ANGELUS, four of whose crew rescued the first eight of the more badly frozen men, was sunk on May 19, 1943, between Bermuda and Nova Scotia, by a German U-Boat after its captain had ordered the crew into boats. The lifeboat headed for the U.S. but at the end of the fourth day, a bad storm came up during which the boat capsized and eventually only two men of the nine-man crew, Walter Boudreau, Moncton, and Arthur Holmans, Belleoram, Nfld., were rescued by the U.S. Navy on May 24,<sup>26</sup> and landed at Portland, Maine.<sup>27</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1.A full page ad by the Robert Simpson Co., Montreal, Limited August 23, 1943, appealing for support for The Navy League of Canada, quoted D.H. Gibson, CBE, President of The Navy League, "...these ...men were exposed on the upper deck during the howling gale and fierce blasts of the winter wind and icy spray coating their clothing. They dared not go below for fear of their ship keeling over with the weight of ice. Rescued by gallant Louisbourg fishermen, they were brought into the Navy League hostel..."

2.Interview by Ed Levy, in "Louisbourg Fishermen Rescue U.S. Seamen," in Cape Breton's Magazine, No. 41, pages 55-59.

"The USN Report" hereinafter referred to is the U.S. Navy's Office of the Judge Advocate General's "Non-exempt portions of the Investigative Report of the Investigation convened at U.S. Naval Observer's Office, HMCS Dockyards, Halifax, N.S. by order ...to investigate the circumstances connected with the grounding and probable loss of the U.S.S. SC-709 at Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, January 21, 1943." The investigation was held from January 27, 1943 to May 27, 1943, as crew members became available for questioning.

3.Report submitted to Lt. W.C. French, jr., Commanding Officer, SC-709, by Ensign Albert Jordan, March 18, 1943. USN Report, page 2.

4.Investigating Officer, USN Report, page 50-51

5.Report of Lt. William C. French, jr., Commanding-Officer, SC-709, USN Report, page 3

6.Statement of George Gagnon, CBM (PA), U.S. Navy, to Inquiry, USN Report, enclosure B, page 1.

7.Report of Lt. W.C. French, jr., USN Report, page 4

8.Ibid, page 5

9.Testimony by H.W. Luessen, QM2c, USN. USN Report, page 24

10.Statement of Lt. W.C. French, jr., USN Report, p.6

11. January 21, 1943, M. S. Huntington Diary, Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, Sydney, N.S.

12."The Wreck of the 709," The Cape Breton Highlander, April 5, 1967, page 4. Published in Sydney, N.S.

13.Report by Lt. W.C. French, USN Report, page 6.

14.Cape Breton Highlander, April 5, 1967

15.Report by Lt. W.C. French, USN Report, page 6.

16.Ibid, page 7

17.Entry for January 22, M.S. Huntington Diary

18.Letter of January 24, 1984, from Earl Lewis, Bonshaw, P.E.I.

19. Charles Bagnell in "Louisbourg Fishermen Rescue U.S. Seamen," Cape Breton's Magazine, No. 41.

20. Report of Ensign Albert Jordan to Lt. W.C. French, jr., USN Report, page 13.

21. Interview with Walter Boudreau, January 20, 1993. He remembers he was in the first dory.

22.Interview with Ed Levy, Cape Breton's Magazine, # 41.

23.Interview with Charles Bagnell, Ibid

24.Interview with Ed Levy, Ibid

25.Report of Ensign A.D. Jordan to Lt. W.C. French, jr., USN Report, page 13.

26."Wake of the Schooners:", by Robert Parsons, Grand Bank, Nfld. Pages 161-163. To be published.

27. Interview with Walter Boudreau, Jan. 20, 1993.

The Louisbourg Heritage Society expresses its appreciation to the following for their help and encouragement in the preparation of this Heritage Note No. 3: Ed Levy, Louisbourg, N.S., Earl Lewis, Bonshaw, P.E.I., Gordon Troke and Sandy Matheson, Sydney, former crew members of the ASCUPART, the families of Charles, Nelson and Joseph Bagnell, Wilbert Goyetche and Earl Lewis; Walter Boudreau, Charles Purvis, retired, Canadian Coast Guard College, North Sydney, Capt. Paul Chaisson of Sydney, McConnell Library, Sydney, the members of the CCG Station in Louisbourg, and the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Dept. of the United States Navy, Alexandria, Va., U.S.A. Pictures were supplied by Mr. W.H. Luessen, Gibbstown, N.J., of the SC-709; and by their families of the Louisbourg men.

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