



Heritage Notes

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"RESCUED BY GALLANT FISHERMEN..."¹

Jean Kyte

"I couldn't believe we were 25 to 30 minutes"², 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."³ It proceeded to Portland, Maine, and then left on January 18 for Argentia, Nfld.

The "Finding of Facts"⁴ 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."⁵

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."⁶ (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