

THE TORPEDO OF SAINT YVON

How the only Nazi bomb to hit
North America in WW II nearly got me.

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Millions of people were killed in WW II and frightful damage was done; but only one Nazi bomb hit North America, and that was in a far away corner of Quebec. It was a peculiar bomb, and by chance I happened to be near.

In September 1942 U boats were sinking our ships faster than we could build them. I was between freshman and sophomore years at Harvard working at the Liberty Shipyard in Providence, RI., often with twelve hour days and six day weeks trying to build Liberty ships faster than the Nazi subs could sink them. When fall term was near I decided to take a break and travel north on my old motorcycle to visit school chums and cousins.

The bike was a third hand, 1928, Indian Scout. It was in good shape because the depression had taught us to take care of things. I loaded it with my father's WW I army gear such as mess kit, canteen, sleeping bag, and also a full length black rubber rain coat, tools, a tire patching kit, tire pump and other essentials; flats were common in those days.

One of my cousins lived just over the line in English speaking North Hatley, Quebec. After visits in New Hampshire I headed to Canada. At Canadian Customs they said USA motorcycles could only get one gallon of gas, but they also said kerosene was unrationed. I experimented with kerosene at my cousin's house. You couldn't start the engine on it, but once started and warm it would run almost as well on kerosene as on gasoline. The old Indian bike was senior enough to have priming cups making it easy to dose the engine with gas each morning for starting, then switch to kerosene for running - no more rationing problem. The precious gallon of gas rode in a can strapped on the rear. The kerosene went in the regular tank.

Happy with the prospect of greater cruising range I headed to Quebec City planning to do the thousand mile circuit around Gaspé Peninsula. Family friends strongly recommended this. The first night, bespattered with mud, I presented myself to the desk at the Chateau

Frontenac. With a long face the desk clerk gave me a room.

The trip went well. After the luxury of the Frontenac, living became more primitive - sleeping on the ground - sometimes under bridges for shelter - no bother for a young fellow. The weather was chilly - some snow flurries. The rubber rain coat broke the wind. I was enjoying the ride.

On Sunday, September 6, 1942 things changed.

News of the war was censored. Everybody in USA knew Canada had been in the war for more than two years, but few of us knew of the fierce U boat battles going on in the Saint Lawrence River. Hitler was determined to keep Canadian supply ships from reaching England. By the end of 1942 U boats in the St. Lawrence had sunk twenty six ships and taken hundreds of lives. Few knew this, least of all me.

Just before noon on that September 6th, while on the dusty road that rings the Gaspé, with wide Saint Lawrence on the left and steep mountains on the right, I rolled into a little fishing village called Saint Yvon. Kerosene was low so I stopped at the only store for more. A gang of fishermen jumped on me and yanked me off the bike. Some held me while others grabbed the bike and rolled it into a nearby barn. Their French jabbering made little sense to me, but I could see them studying the lintel over the door as a place to tie the rope to string me up. It was clear what they were about to do, but I had no clue why. My English made no sense to them. Things were bad.

For two years gas rationing had kept tourists away from this remote place. Visitors were scarce, but visiting U boats were not. Gaspésians knew about Nazi submarines first hand from wreckage washed up on the beach. They had seen many sinkings and rescued many people with their fishing boats. On May 12, 1942 they landed 80 survivors from the torpedoed British steamer, NICOYA, on the nearby beach at Saint Yvon. Rumors abounded, people were edgy. On the day I arrived people were really edgy because another big scare had just hit them. They were sure the Germans were coming and I had to be a part of it. My black boots, black rubber raincoat, black and red chrome less bike, goggles, and military camping gear must have presented a perfect picture of a Nazi storm trooper to these somewhat isolated people.

Before they could get on with what looked like a necktie party the local priest was fetched. Astonishingly, in that impoverished region, he arrived in a chauffeur driven LaSalle limousine. The crowd quieted. The priest spoke English which he had learned in his seminary days in Chicago. He listened to my story and quickly saw I was just a young American tourist. He commanded the crowd to put me in the back of his limo and then hurried me out of town to the next village to the east, Grand Étang, where he knew an English speaking couple named Alexander who were staying at Godfray's trout fishing camp. The priest turned me over to the Alexanders, guests at the camp, but on the way there he explained what had happened. He didn't know the whole story but he said a U boat had apparently fired a torpedo at a Canadian steamer which was traveling upstream between it and the shore. The torpedo missed the steamer and proceeded to the beach where it blasted a seven foot crater and broke more than 50 windows, 19 in one house. People were terrified. This was an invasion and I had to be part of it!

The priest said he would be back at midnight to help me get the bike. The Alexanders arranged a cabin for me, and then served a splendid fresh trout dinner. At midnight I got the bike and made fast tracks back to the cabin in Grand Étang.

Next morning the Godfrays topped the tank with kerosene and sent me on my way. Soon it started to rain. I stopped in a convenient covered bridge for shelter and while standing there, astride the bike waiting for the shower to pass, three fishermen came walking toward me from the other direction. They looked at me, started chattering in French, and pounced. It was Saint Yvon all over again, but these guys were not so threatening. They made me push the bike up a hill to a house. One went to get the authorities - the other two, the house wife, and a brood of children guarded me. Thinking I was hungry the house wife offered me a bowl of boiled cod fish eyes - not the most appetizing sight, but apparently a delicacy of that neighborhood. Under the circumstances I thought it best to oblige.

In about a half an hour a Canadian Coast Artillery soldier arrived from his lookout post at Fame Point. He was a city fellow from Montreal

and a little more worldly than the Gaspésians. He quickly saw my innocence and let me go.

I finished the trip with no more arrests; enjoyed the scenery of such places as L'Anse a Beaufils, Percé, Paspébiac and Restigouche; and took notice of the wonderfully simple, seaworthy, double-ended, locally built cod fishing schooners.

Soon I was back in Cambridge for the fall term. Many classmates had already joined the armed services, and before the end of 1942 I was among them, having volunteered in the army, and wound up in the European conflict.

In 1961 I wrote the Royal Canadian Navy for information about the St. Yvon incident. A Commander P.L. Thurber, RCN sent me a report which, shortened, is as follows:

The U boat was U-165 probably captained by Rudolf Hoffmann who had been second in command to Reinhard Hardegan the captain of legendary U-123 which sunk so many ships the previous spring off the East Coast of United States in Operation Paukenschlage (Drumbeat).

At Saint Yvon the ship which U-165's torpedo missed was the Canadian pulpwood freighter, SS MEADCLIFFE HALL, 2745 tons, 258 feet, triple expansion steam carrying pulpwood from the town of Gaspé to Ogdensburg, New York. Probably if the U boat's captain had known the MEADCLIFFE HALL was only carrying pulpwood it would not have wasted a torpedo. The MEADCLIFFE HALL's captain saw the torpedo porpoise several times across his bow before going on to the beach and exploding.

While this was happening a Canadian Navy armed yacht, the HMCS RACCOON, was nearby, escorting outward bound convoy #QS-33 passing the inbound MEADCLIFFE HALL. The HMCS RACCOON probably diverted the U Boat and saved the SS MEADCLIFFE HALL. Two days later two U boats, in wolf pack style, sank RACCOON with all hands. Then about three weeks later, on September 27, 1942, U-165 itself was sunk with all hands when it hit a mine in the Bay of Biscay on its way back to its La Rochelle base.

In 1961 my wife, Nancy, and our two small children, Susan and Paul, visited the Gaspé. At Saint Yvon we saw the marker on the roadside which

said, "TORPILLE ALEMANDE A VISITER" and we stayed at Godfrays enjoying another magnificent fresh trout dinner. While in the area at that time I had a chance to speak with the postmistress who remembered me from 1942. She had saved a grapefruit sized piece of the German torpedo which had come through her uncle's cellar door. She gave me this relic which I have since given to the Naval War College Museum in Newport, RI. It is a piece of the only German weaponry to hit anywhere in North America in WW II.

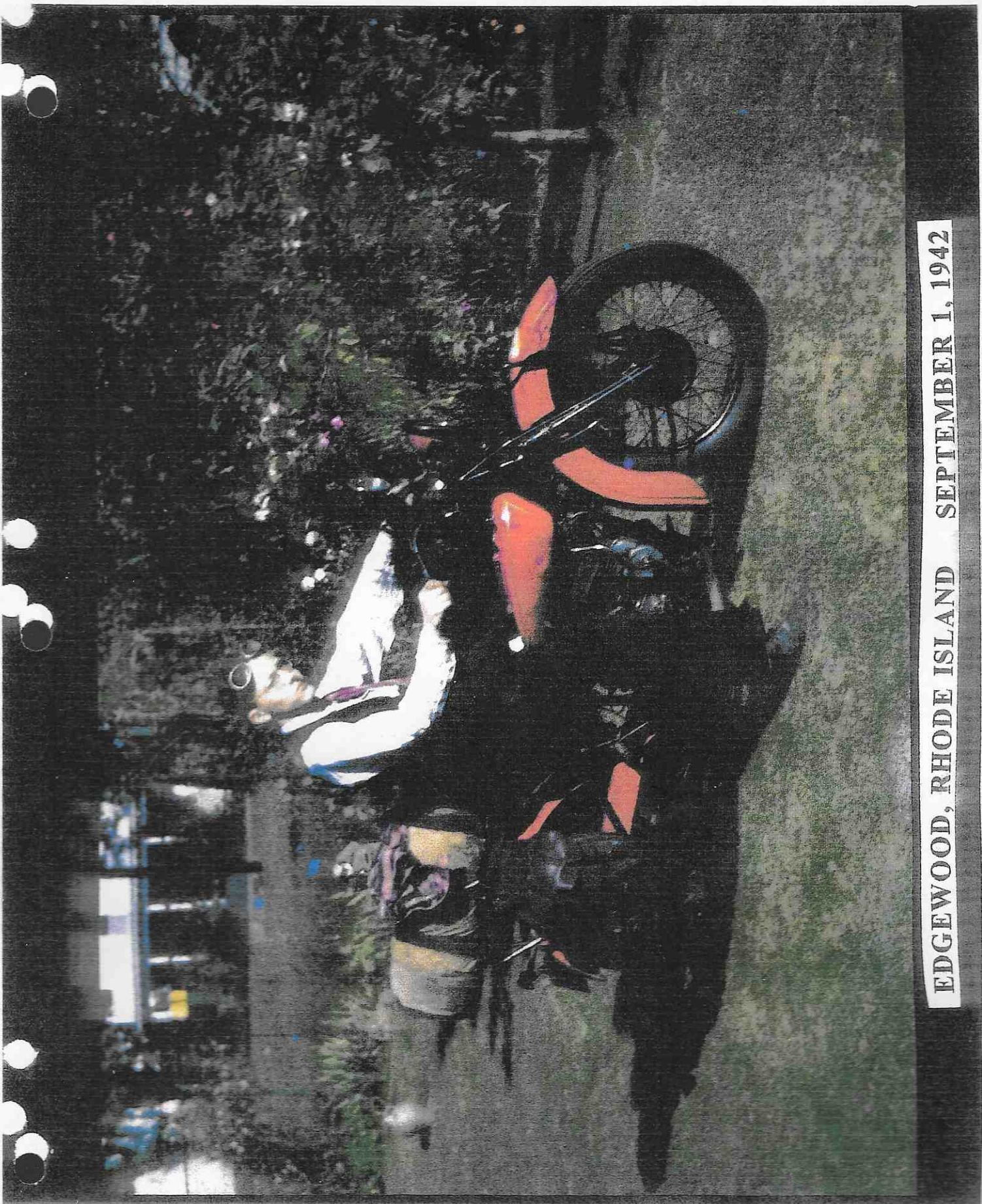
The old Indian Scout motorcycle has been meticulously restored by Luke Walker of Newport, RI and now belongs to a collector in Massachusetts.

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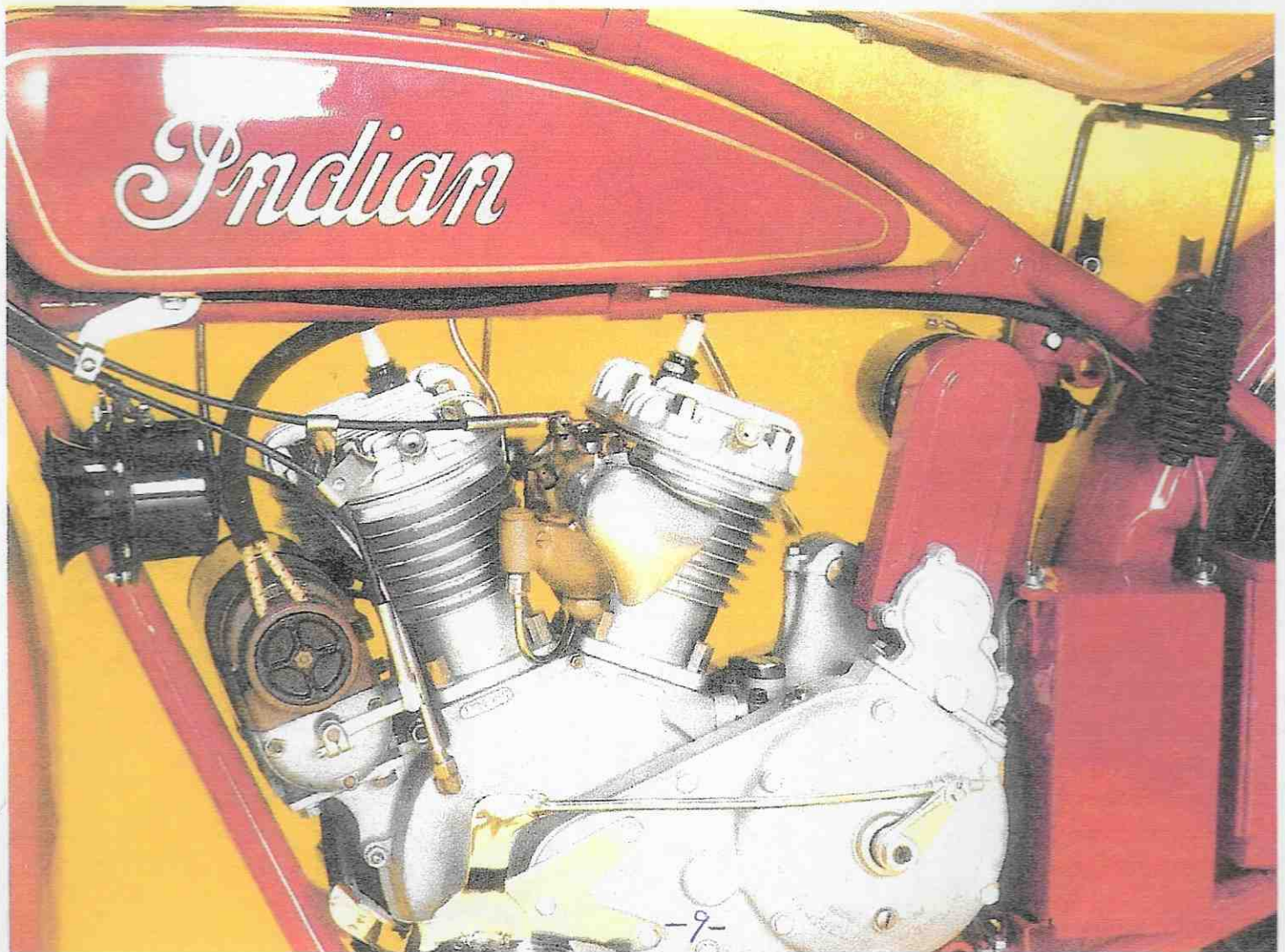
1. Letter to Robert Merriam from the Department of Defense, Royal Canadian Navy, Ottawa, April 19, 1961 signed by P.L.Thurber, Cdr.
2. Letter to Robert Merriam from the Musée de la Gaspésie, 80 Boulevard Gaspé, case Postale 680, Gaspé, PQ, GOC 1RO. Signed by Carmen Boulay, Sec.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. EDGEWOOD, RHODE ISLAND - SEPTEMBER 1, 1942.
2. 1928 INDIAN SCOUT 45 MOTORCYCLE.
3. ON THE GASPÉ SHORE OF THE SAINT LAWRENCE, SEPT., 1942.
4. GRAND ÉTANG.
5. REMAINS OF GERMAN TORPEDO WHICH STRUCK SAINT YVON.
6. OBERLEUTNANT ZUR SEE RUDOLF HOFFMANN IN CENTER, PROBABLY CAPTAIN OF U 165 WHICH FIRED THE TORPEDO.
7. SS MEADCLIFFE HALL.
8. MAP OF GASPÉ.
9. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE PAPERS.



EDGEWOOD, RHODE ISLAND SEPTEMBER 1, 1942



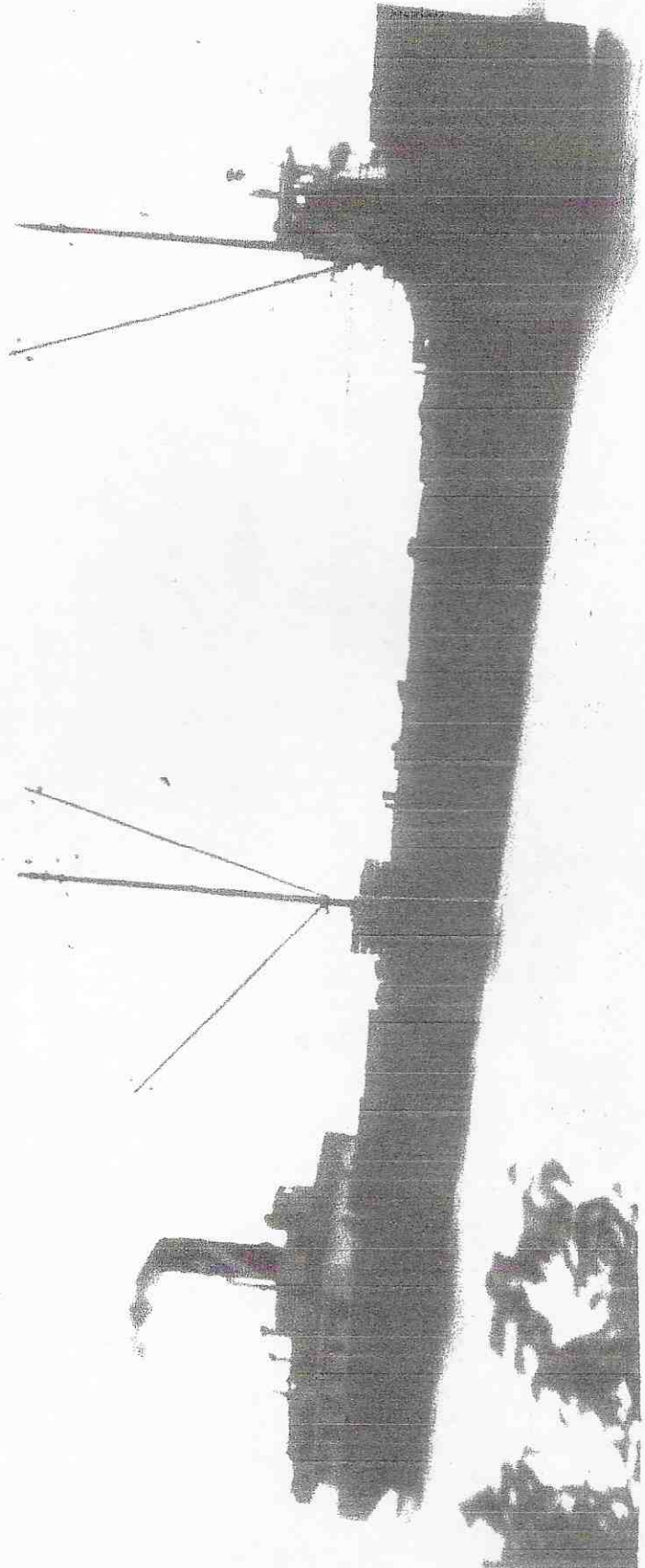




CHEMIN DE GASPÉ, P.Q. — AT GODFRAYS — GRAND ÉTANG, GASPÉ, P.Q.



**OBERLEUTNANT ZUR SEE RUDOLF HOFFMANN IN CENTRE
CAPTAIN OF U 165 WHICH FIRED THE TORPEDO**



SS MEADCLIFFE HALL

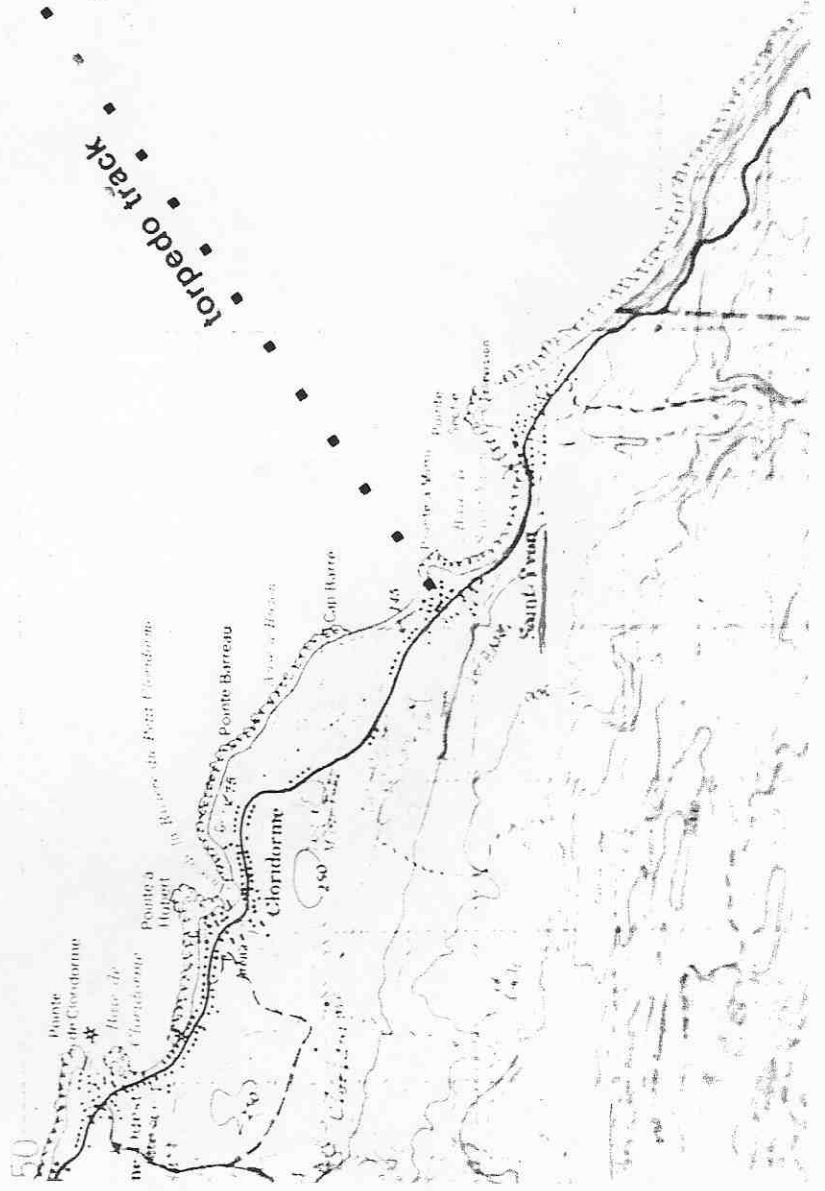
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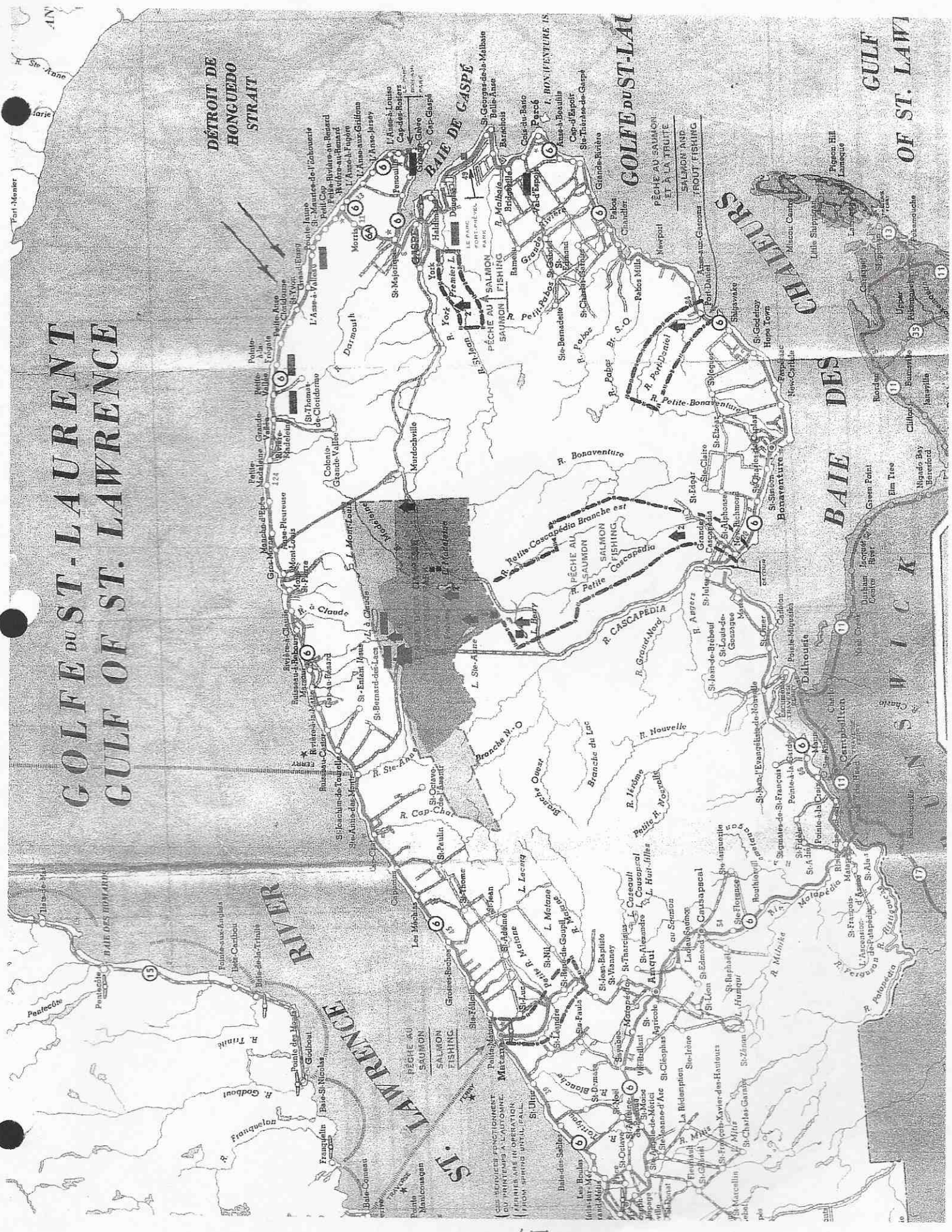
(F L E U V E S A I N T - L A U R E N T)

U-165

CANADIAN MERCHANT SHIP
MEADCLIFF HALL



GOLFE DU ST-LAURENT GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE



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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE FOUNDATION, INC.

U. S. Naval War College • Newport, Rhode Island 02841-5010
Tel: (401) 848-8300 Fax: (401) 848-8302 (800) 759-5983

15 July 1993

Mr. Robert W. Merriam
697 Tillinghast Road
East Greenwich, RI 02818-1424

DEED OF GIFT TO THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE FOUNDATION

By these presents I (we) hereby irrevocably and unconditionally give, transfer, assign and deliver to the Naval War College Foundation, Inc., by way of gift, all right, title and interest in and to the following object(s), and all rights and interest, including copyright associated with said object(s), which I(we) own:

TORPEDO: Fragment of a German WWII torpedo that exploded at the shoreline of St. Yvon, Gaspee Peninsula, Quebec, Canada, 1942 (only German weaponry to hit and explode on the North American continent during the war). Also copies of associated documents and pictures.

Dated this 18th day of July, 1993:

Robert W. Merriam
Signature of Donor

The Naval War College Foundation, Inc., hereby acknowledges receipt of the above Deed of Gift:

Dated this 27th day of July, 1993:

By Elizabeth G. Hylle

Attachments: _____



93.30

FRAGMENT OF GERMAN
TORPEDO WHICH EXPLODED
AT ST. JOHN, GASPE
PENINSULA, P.Q.
SEPT. 5, 1942

ROBERT W. MERRIAM

Naval War College Foundation



In recognition of your contribution of

Fragment of a German WWII torpedo

to the Naval War College Foundation,

The Board of Trustees

expresses its appreciation to

Robert W. Merriam

Robert W. Merriam





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Records created by departments and agencies of the Federal Government

Search terms : " : 2=1 : 1=MEADCLIFFE AND HALL : " References: 1 - 20 of 20 : Last update: November 23, 1999

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Outside Dates: 1943
Finding Aid number: 24-176
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 Parts: 11
File Title: Submarines - Enemy Activities - Reports of Action with Enemy Submarines
 MEADCLIFFE HALL
Outside Dates: 1942/09/05
Finding Aid number: 24-310
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 File : 9704-237 , Access code: 31
File Title: WRECKS, CASUALTIES AND SALVAGE - INVESTIGATIONS - MEADCLIFFE
 HALL GROUNDED TWENTY MILES WEST OF QUEBEC
Outside Dates: 1947
Finding Aid number: 12-1 12-2
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File Title: MEADCLIFFE HALL - Articles of agreement and ship's log
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- Finding Aid number:** 24-91

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[CMHG Home](#) > [Volume 3 \(1872-2000\)](#) > [CHAPTER 5: From One World War to Another \(1919-43\)](#) > [The Army to 1942](#) > [Page 660](#)

[« Back](#)



Pieces of a German torpedo run aground on the beach at St Yvon near Gaspé in 1942

Several waves of German submarines were sent to North American waters in 1942 in response to the American entry into World War Two. The Germans found a fruitful hunting ground in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where seven U-boats sank two dozen ships in 1942 alone. The crisis lasted until September of 1943, when improved training and a breakthrough in decrypting German codes allowed the defenders to gain the upper hand. (Musée de la Gaspésie, Gaspé, Quebec)

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