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Directorate of History
National Defence Headquarters
Ottawa, Canada
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28
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The Loss of the S.S. "Nerissa".

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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,
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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. 9 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~~ ^{important} 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,

