



MERCHANT NAVY COMMEMORATIVE THEME PROJECT (MNCTP)



NEWS RELEASE

81ST ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION OF THE SINKING OF
THE NEWFOUNDLAND FERRY S.S. CARIBOU

OCTOBER 14TH, 2023

OTTAWA, TODAY– Mr. Stéphane Ouellette, President and Chief Executive Officer, Merchant Navy Commemorative Theme Project (MNCTP), was joined by Rear-Admiral Josée Kurtz, Commander, Maritime Forces Atlantic (MARLANT) and Joint Task Force Atlantic (JTFA), Royal Canadian Navy, in remembering the Sinking of the Newfoundland passenger ferry SS *Caribou* and the 136 souls that perished.

“Eighty one years ago, in the early morning hours of October 14, 1942, the icy autumn waters, off Canada’s East Coast, were to seal the fate of a ship and 136 of her 237 passengers forever.

“Having no premonition of the tragic events about to unfold, the valiant Captain Ben Taverner and his Newfoundland ferry Caribou left the docks of North Sydney, at 1900 Atlantic Standard Time (AST), on October 13, 1942, en route to Port aux Basques, Newfoundland.

“Looming in the distance, shortly before midnight, Captain Ulrich Graf of the German U–boat, U–69, sighted the passenger ship travelling at 10.5 knots, and the escort HMCS Grandmère, identified as a “two-stack destroyer” (KTB). The hydrophones of the HMCS Grandmère, astern, were not able to distinguish U–69’s propeller noise from that of the Caribou’s. Her asdic range, in optimal circumstances, was no more than 1200–1500 yards, and she had no radar.

“Forty miles southwest of Caribou’s destination, at 0221 AST, U–69 fired a torpedo and hit the Caribou 47° 19’ N, 59° 29’ W, exploding her boilers and sinking her four minutes later.

“During the moments that followed, havoc struck the forsaken vessel. Turbulent explosions jostled victims into a state of chaos and confusion, and with water gushing in, passengers searched frantically for their family members, life belts, and lifeboats.

“One hundred and thirty-six people perished, among them were 73 civilians, including woman and children, and 118 military personnel. Miraculously, a fifteen month–old baby survived the ordeal. He was projected overboard, in a delirious panic, by his mother who then, by jumping in after him, plummeted to her death. The young child was saved on three separate occasions, each by a different rescuer. Out of fifteen children on board, he was the only one to survive.

“Despair permeated the air as HMCS Grandmère returned to begin her rescue operations, after her unrelenting search for U–69, which ended at 0420 AST. Many yachts and fishing vessels came to assist the survivors of the Caribou. They (the survivors) arrived in Sydney at 1640 AST.

“For the survivors and the families of the dearly departed, the psychological ramifications were profoundly grievous. The ruthlessness and abhorrence of war would manifest itself into a shear reality into the deep recesses of their tormented minds forevermore.”

Quote

“As we mark the 81st anniversary of the sinking of the SS Caribou, we pay tribute to the loss of the Ship and to the many lives she had onboard, and honour those who continued to go back to sea in the face of such perilous conditions, and the ever-looming threat to serve and support the war effort. The legacy of unyielding bravery that was, and continues to be, demonstrated by Canada’s Merchant Navy and those Merchant Mariners is exemplified in the commemoration of this tragic event, one of many suffered by Canadian Merchant Mariners who faced the dangers of the Atlantic to keep the lifelines open to the European front in World War II.”

– Rear-Admiral | Contre-amiral M.T.J. Kurtz, Commander, Maritime Forces Atlantic (MARLANT) and Joint Task Force Atlantic (JTFA), Royal Canadian Navy

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