

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

H.M.C.S."FORT RAMSAY"

Canada's Naval Base at GASPÉ
during World War II.

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H.M.C.S. "FORT RAMSAY"

FOREWORD

The role of the harbour of Gaspé as a naval base in World War II has been well described by James W. Essex in his beautifully illustrated book, "VICTORY IN THE ST. LAWRENCE-CANADA'S UNKNOWN WAR". The Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Office of the Secretary of State assisted in its publication. Mr. Essex's book provides a unique and fascinating view of Gaspé during the war years.

A less well-known account of naval activity in and about Gaspé harbour is found in the following report on the Naval Service of Canada. It is recalled by "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" as complementary to such previous articles on World War II as:

No. 297 FROM GASPÉ TO CEYLON - Highlights of the career of a very distinguished Officer of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Leonard J. Birchall, O.B.E., D.F.C.

No. 324 NAZI SPY IN NEW CARLISLE - The German submarine U-518 lands the Nazi spy, Lieutenant Werner von Janowski at New Carlisle in November, 1942

and the initial articles of the RCN series on HMCS GASPÉ, HMCS BONAVENTURE and HMCS RESTIGOUCHE (Nos. 311, 312, 313)

The magnificent harbour of Gaspé Bay that provided haven to Jacques Cartier in 1534, witnessed the defeat of the De Roquemont supply fleet by the Kirkes in 1628, was visited by the ill-fated British fleet of Admiral Sir Hovenden Walker in 1711, was occupied by the Gaspee Expedition of General James Wolfe in 1758 and saw the departure of the Armada bearing Canada's First Contingent to World War I in 1914, faced serious threat from Nazi submarine attack during World War II. The steps taken to meet that threat is the subject of the following report.

NAVAL SERVICE OF CANADA

Gaspé Bay is situated on the eastern tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, a tongue of land about 150 miles long forming the southern shore of the lower St. Lawrence River. The bay is sixteen miles long, and is divided into an inner and outer harbour by a sand-spit which projects half-way across the basin some eleven miles from its entrance. The inner harbour, 600 to 2,900 yards wide, is completely sheltered, and accessible to any kind of warship; while the outer harbour, with an average width of five miles, provides unlimited anchorage, but is subject to heavy swells and open to direct winds from the south-east. Gaspé Bay was ideally situated to serve as a base for the protection of the St. Lawrence River and the northern portion of the Gulf, and also provided an excellent and easily-defended anchorage for capital ships. Its value for naval purposes was marred only by the fact that it is icebound from December to May. The village of Gaspé, with a population slightly under a thousand, lies at the head of Gaspé Bay, and is the terminus of the Canadian National Railways' line serving the southern coast of the Peninsula.

The establishment of a naval base at Gaspé was first mentioned early in 1940, when consideration was being given to the allocation of a small number of armed yachts and aircraft for the protection of the St. Lawrence River area. The early naval plans for Gaspé were extremely modest, and contemplated merely the provision of a staff of twelve to coordinate naval and air Operations and to make the necessary victualling arrangements for five armed yachts and possibly two destroyers.¹⁰⁶ By summer, however, Gaspé had become more important in the eyes of the naval planners, because of its suitability as a fleet anchorage for British or United States warships in the event of the invasion of Great Britain. For this reason and because of its commanding position in the Gulf, Gaspé was included as one of the three main bases to be developed to support Canadian warships, and also any allied ones which events might bring to those waters.¹⁰⁷

By the summer of 1940 Gaspé was envisaged as a defended anchorage, and a small advanced base comprising a combined navy and air force Operations building, as well as a wireless station, water-supply and electric power plants, separate naval barracks, and storehouses. Arrangements were made for diesel fuel to be supplied locally, and the first two armed yachts, expected to commission in July, were to be allocated to the Gaspé command. Port defences were to include fixed-artillery defences, anti-submarine and anti-torpedo defences, and also a controlled minefield when materials became available.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, in June 1940, H.M.C.S. *Eileen*, a sixty-five-foot motor launch converted for river-patrol duties, and the first warship to enter Gaspé in the Second World War, arrived in search of the naval base. Unable to find it the ship proceeded

¹⁰⁶ Naval Staff Minutes, Mar. 18 and Apr. 16, 1940.

¹⁰⁷ Report of Sub-committee on Fleet Anchorages in Eastern Canada, June 22, 1940, N.S. 1400-9 (1); Naval Plan, July 7, 1940, N.S. 1017-10-1 (2).

¹⁰⁸ C.N.S. to Min., July 12, 1940, *ibid.*; C.N.S. to D. Min., July 24, 1940, *ibid.*

on its way to Rivière du Loup.¹⁰⁹ The *Eileen* had been unsuccessful because no naval establishment existed at Gaspé until early in July when the late Cdr. J. W. R. Roy, R.C.N., was appointed Senior Naval Officer. Two junior officers were appointed at the same time, and the base began operations in a small wooden building in the lower part of the town.¹¹⁰

The Senior Naval Officer, with no ships to command, concerned himself with establishing communications, and selecting sites for the naval base and the outlying defence establishments. The first wireless station was set up in a hen-coop in the garden of a house rented by the R.C.A.F., and was in operation in July. The site finally chosen for the base was at Sandy Bay on the south shore of the inner harbour, several miles from town and close to the railway. A large flat tract of land in otherwise hilly country, it provided room for expansion, made for easy construction, and was, moreover, already served by a Dominion Government wharf and two oil tanks. Suitable sites were also chosen for port defence installations along the shore of the outer harbour and at the entrance to the bay.¹¹¹ In October, H.M.C.S. *Vison* arrived to become the first warship to operate out of the base. In November the Gaspé sub-command was closed down for the winter months and *Vison* returned to Halifax.¹¹²

It was not until the following summer that port defences were installed at the port. The contract for boom defences was let in April, 1941, and the work was completed by August. Two fixed-defence batteries of two 75-mm. and two 4.7-inch guns respectively came into operation in July, while two 10-inch counter-bombardment guns, obtained in the United States, were ready for action the following month.¹¹³ The examination service started in September when the *Vemming*, a 58-foot diesel-powered craft, took up station in Gaspé harbour. A temporary port war signal station was established at one of the batteries, and a war watching station was located in the lighthouse at Cape Gaspé. By 1941 the use of Gaspé as a defended anchorage for big ships seemed less likely than it had the previous year; no steps were taken to install a controlled minefield, and anti-torpedo nets assembled for Gaspé

¹⁰⁹ "Gaspé: The Story of a Base," in R.C.N.M.R. No. 16, Apr. 1943.

¹¹⁰ Naval Staff Minutes, June 23, 1940; Navy List, June 30, 1940.

¹¹¹ S.N.O. Gaspé to C.O.A.C., Aug. 1, 1940; "Report on Development of Gaspé" by Lieut. (SB) (E) D. W. Overend, R.C.N.V.R., Apr. 1, 1944 (D. of P. records).

¹¹² N.O.I.C., Gaspé, Monthly Report, Sept. and Oct. 1940, N.S. 1000-5-17 (1).

¹¹³ Overend, "Report on Gaspé" cited above (D. of P. records); information obtained from Hist. Sec. (Gen. Staff).

were sent to Sydney to give additional protection to that important convoy assembly port.¹¹⁴

Plans for the construction of the base had proceeded slowly during the winter and spring of 1940-41, and had undergone revision and expansion. Additions included a 200-ton marine haul-out for M.L.'s and a 6,000-barrel diesel-fuel tank. On July 24 the contract for the naval base was let to A. Janine and Co. of Montreal, who were also responsible for constructing army and air force facilities located on either side of the naval site. The work began almost immediately, and by the end of the year Gaspé was well on the way to becoming a small but complete operational base.¹¹⁵

The port opened for the 1941 navigational season in June, and the following month four armed yachts, the *Reindeer*, *Raccoon*, *Lynx*, and *Vison*, arrived to form the Gaspé Force. The base complement grew slowly, with the numbers reaching 8 officers and 51 men by November.¹¹⁶ Accommodation was found in private houses, summer hotels, and cabins, in the town, while a canteen was opened in a farmhouse near the naval base. Operationally the season was a quiet one—the last Gaspé was to have for some time—and the routine life of the base was broken only by the visit of an occasional new-construction ship as it made its way from the St. Lawrence to Halifax.¹¹⁷

Construction at the base continued through the winter, and by March, 1942, the first buildings were occupied by the base staff. On May 1 the naval base was commissioned as H.M.C.S. "Fort Ramsay." It had enjoyed this distinction for less than two weeks when word was received that the S.S. *Nicoya* had been torpedoed eight miles off Chloridorme on the north-east coast of Gaspé Peninsula. The only naval ship at the base, the examination vessel *Venning*, was immediately dispatched to search the area, while eighty survivors were brought to Gaspé by road. This event ended the routine and obscure rôle that Gaspé had hitherto played in the war at sea, and marked the beginning of an active and strenuous summer. It was fortunate that base facilities planned for such an

¹¹⁶ Sec. N.B. to C.O.A.C., Sept. 29, 1942, N.S. 1053-6-1 (1).

¹¹⁶ Information on base construction contained in N.S. 40-7-1 series, and in Overend, Report on Gaspé" (D. of P. records).

¹¹⁶ "Distribution of Canadian Naval Personnel," Nov. 26, 1941, N.S. 1012-5-2 (1). Note: Until Dec. 1942, N.S.H.Q. records of base complements are incomplete and should be considered as approximate only.

¹¹⁷ N.O.I.C. Gaspé, Monthly Reports, *passim*, N.S. 1000-5-17 (1).

eventuality were ready, for the most part, to meet the needs of the warships that were immediately dispatched to form the Gulf Escort Force. By June 1, 5 Bangor minesweepers, 3 M.L.'s, and an armed yacht, were allocated to this Force; which by September included, in addition, 7 corvettes and 3 M.L.'s, making a total of 19 warships. Besides operating and maintaining the Gulf Escort Force, Gaspé provided for the needs of warships of other commands, particularly those of the Western Local Escort Force and of the Sydney and Quebec Forces, which visited the base from time to time. During the summer of 1942, twenty-three ships were sunk in the Gulf, many of them close to Gaspé itself; and this number included two warships of the Gulf Escort Force, the veteran yacht *Raccoon* and the corvette *Charlottetown*. Gaspé not only exercised control over naval counter-measures but assisted in the rescue and care of survivors. In September alone over two hundred survivors were looked after at the base.¹¹⁸

During the year the complement of "Fort Ramsay" steadily increased. By June the figures stood at 16 officers and 164 men, and had increased by the end of the year to 34 and 291 respectively.¹¹⁹ The base complement had far outgrown the number anticipated and provided for in the original building programme. Moreover the use of Gaspé by so many ships in 1942 had severely taxed the limited storage and repair facilities, and during the winter of 1942-43 it was decided to expand

the base by the provision of twenty-five new buildings and the extension of a number of existing ones, and to install a large oil-fuel storage plant and additional magazines. It was found, however, that the many demands on labour and materials at this time prevented the undertaking of the programme until the end of the year.¹²⁰

Meanwhile the St. Lawrence River was closed to all but a limited amount of essential coastal shipping, while the U-boats left the Gulf for Operations elsewhere: the use made of Gaspé during 1943 was therefore much less than had been expected. The base continued to support a force of 3 to 5 Bangor minesweepers and 12 to 14 M.L. s, and the complement reached its peak of 62 officers and 585 men in October, 1943, a

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Allocation of H.M., H.M.C., and Allied Warships to Canadian Forces, N.S. 1056-3-6 series; folder containing documents relating to the defence of the St. Lawrence River and Gulf (D. of P. records).

¹¹⁹ Monthly Personnel Report, June 1942, N.S. 1012-5-26 (1); Weekly Summary of Information respecting Departmental Activities, Dec. 18, 1942 (D.N.H.S. records).

¹²⁰ B.P.C. Minutes, Feb. 6, 1943, N.S. 1078-3-6 (2); Naval Board Minutes, Feb. 8, 1943; D.W.B. to C.N.E.S., July 7, 1943, N.S. 40-7-1 (4).

total far below that of 1,184 which had been estimated in January of that year.¹²¹ Certain improvements were made at the base during 1943: a new war watching station was opened at Cap Rosier, and wireless and telephone communications with other commands were greatly improved; while arrangements were made with the New Brunswick International Paper Co. at Dalhousie for the refit of warships based on Gaspé, thus relieving the strain on other east-coast facilities and avoiding the long trip to Halifax. Because of the number of M.L.'s at the base, a spur was added to the existing wharf for their use; while temporary storage for 96,000 gallons of high-octane gasoline was added to existing air-force tankage which had hitherto been drawn on by M.L.'s.¹²²

By the time new construction could be started at Gaspé it was clear that the strategic importance of that base had diminished to such an extent that further development on a large scale was unnecessary.¹²³ There had been no sinkings in the Gaspé area during the preceding navigational season, and the U-boat appeared to be less aggressive in all operational areas. Accordingly the new programme for Gaspé was largely abandoned. Certain alterations, however, were carried out in existing buildings to provide additional space, and use was made of a farmhouse and contractor's shacks on naval property for summer accommodation. This situation was further alleviated by the taking over of the army buildings adjacent to the naval property, when these became vacant in November, 1944, as a result of a decision to place all of the Gaspé fixed-artillery defences in maintenance, to release men for overseas duty.

It was not until October, 1944, that enemy submarines, now equipped with *Schnorchel*, reappeared in the Gulf; and during the next two months they torpedoed the frigate H.M.-C.S. *Magog*, the corvette *Shawinigan*, and the merchant ship *Fort Thompson*.¹²⁴ Activity at Gaspé flared up briefly during this period, but with the closing of navigation in this area the enemy departed never to return.

¹²¹ Information respecting Departmental Activities, Oct. 14, 1943 (D.N.H.S. records); Overend, "Report on Gaspé" cited above (D. of P. records).
¹²² N.O.I.C. Gaspé, War Diaries, 1943, *passim*, N.S. 1926-112/5.
¹²³ Naval Staff Minutes, Oct. 25, Nov. 15, and Dec. 20, 1943; Naval Board Minutes, Jan. 11, 1944.
¹²⁴ N.O.I.C. Gaspé, War Diary, Oct. and Nov. 1944, N.S. 1926-112/5.

