

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE SHIPWRECK  
AT  
CAP CHAT  
OF  
THE TRANSPORT "PREMIER"

HAVING ON BOARD THE HEAD QUARTERS  
WING OF THE 2nd BATTALION OF THE  
FIRST OR ROYAL REGIMENT ON ITS  
WAY FROM NORTH AMERICA TO THE  
WEST INDIES

NOV. 4th., 1843

KEN ANNETT

## THE SHIPWRECK OF THE TRANSPORT "PREMIER"

### PREFACE

Some forty years ago, in 1942, the Literary and Historical Society of Québec sold part of its unique collection of historical books, documents and artifacts to the Québec Provincial Archives. The material thus transferred included an account of the shipwreck of the transport vessel, "PREMIER"; which had sailed from the seaport of Québec in the late autumn of 1843 with the headquarters wing of the 2nd battalion of the First or Royal Regiment en route to the West Indies. In a fierce, early November storm the "PREMIER" was wrecked at Cap Chat in Gaspesia.

Inquiry and diligent search at the Archives in 1980 and 1981 failed to locate the account of the wreck. The material had been integrated in the general holdings of the Archives and reclassified. Recently, by good luck and fortune, the record of the "PREMIER" shipwreck has come to light. It is recounted here by GASPE OF YESTERDAY in the belief that it will be of interest to the reader of today.

### REGIMENTAL POSTINGS

The 2nd battalion of the First or Royal Regiment left England for service in Canada in the summer of 1836 on the eve of the 1837 Rebellions in Lower and Upper Canada. While the details of that period of serious uprest and armed uprising in the Canadas are beyond the scope of this account, it might be recalled that the leaders of the rebellions, such as Louis Joseph Papineau in Québec and William Lyon Mackenzie in Ontario where both forced into temporary exile when the armed uprisings were quelled by British troops. The Royal Regiment's 2nd battalion served in various parts of Canada until 1843. The threat of rebellion then having subsided, the Regiment was ready for a new posting.

in the West Indies. Three other Corps, the 23rd., 71st., and 85th received posting to the Caribbean at the same time. The Left Wing of the Royal Regiment under the command of Captain Muller was the first to proceed to Québec and from there to Barbados without incident. The Right Wing (Headquarters) left Toronto on October 9th., and after an exciting and perilous run through the St. Lawrence rapids at Cascades, Cedars, Long Sault and Lachine in two bateaux and a small schooner-rigged steamer reached Québec and their temporary quarters in the Jesuit Barrack. Their transport vessel, "PREMIER" had not yet reached Québec but made port a few days after the arrival of the troops.

#### THE TRANSPORT "PREMIER"

A barque-rigged vessel of 500 tons burden out of England, the "PREMIER" proved to be a strong, well-built and beautifully modelled ship, if somewhat over-masted. She had brought a full load of goods to Québec from England, the unloading of which required some days. For reasons unknown, but which were not a happy augury, her Captain and several of his crew left "PREMIER" on arrival at Québec. The command fell to the Chief Mate, Mr. New.

#### EMBARKATION

The day of embarkation, October 28th., provided a military spectacle familiar, but ever fascinating, to residents of the Old Capital. The Royals marched from the Jesuit Barrack to dockside preceded by the Bands of the 68th and 82nd Regiments of the garrison. Some time was required to board and settle in the 350 officers, soldiers, women, children and crew with all their equipment, stores, luggage and provisions. However, by October 31st. the "PREMIER" was ready to sail and left on the ebb tide in a light westerly breeze on its journey down the St. Lawrence to the open sea.

NOVEMBER STORM

By November 3rd the "PREMIER" had reached Green Island. There the pilot left the ship though it was normal for pilots to disembark at Bic. Late season navigation on the St. Lawrence in the era of the sailing ship was always fraught with danger of storm as the countless tales of shipwreck testify. As the "PREMIER" was off Bic a rising wind and snow were ominous signs of a major storm. Captain New set course for Pointe des Monts, as landmarks about Bic disappeared in mist and snow, with the objective of taking "PREMIER" past Anticosti into the more open Gulf waters. With nightfall the wind rose to gale force and the ship became coated with thick, driving snow and ice. The helmsman reported a sluggish compass. However, no special precautions were taken to post additional lookouts or to assess the influence of the tricky river currents on the ship's course.

At approximately 3 o'clock in the morning the "PREMIER'S" passengers were hurled from their berths in confusion as the ship struck ground with a mighty crash. A fearsome sight greeted those who made their way on deck - inky darkness, the roar of the gale, driving snow, mountainous waves bursting mast high over the stranded ship. The back of the ship appeared to have been broken by its grounding and it was essential that the masts and tangle of sails and rigging be cut away. Below deck the icy seas were bursting into the ship sending furniture adrift and soaking everyone and everything. However, in the best British Army tradition, there was no panic and steps were taken to shelter the women and children as far as it was possible.

DAWN OF NOVEMBER 4th., 1843

As light dawned on Nov. 4th there was seen at some distance landward a barren shore washed by tremendous surf. The huts of

by the waves that the attempt failed. Next, the ship's launch manned by Lieut. Lysans and four men, attempted to make shore with a line from the ship only to capsize in the surf, be thrown clear of the broken launch, and dragged ashore soaked and exhausted. The last hope to get a line ashore lay with the heavy "long boat". It was launched with great difficulty from "PREMIER" but did manage to carry a rope to the shore. By this time word of the tragedy had spread and a large, sturdy "country boat" was launched and reached the wreck. It brought M. Louis Roy, the chief person of the nearby village and a Justice of the Peace for the district. He told the survivors that they were wrecked in Cap Chat Bay some two miles to the east of the landmark, Cap Chat. M. Roy, a man of initiative and compassion, was to prove a great help in landing, housing and feeding the unfortunate passengers and crew of the "PREMIER".

#### ALL ASHORE :

Throughout the day of Nov. 4th., the rescue and the landing from the wreck to shore proceeded apace. The few homes of the village of Cap Chat could not begin to provide shelter for the 350 men, women and children so rudely thrown upon their shores so every shanty, barn and hut was pressed into service. The regimental officers established a headquarters in the house of Louis Roy and a party was sent to Ste. Anne des Monts, 9 miles to the east of Cap Chat in search of additional accommodation. No road existed - the only way to travel was by boat or along the rocky beach at low tide. At Ste. Anne, M. Sasseville was helpful in opening his home to the survivors and in finding other shelter in "some tolerably good log houses".

#### FEEDING THE SURVIVORS

Though the fisher folk of Cap Chat offered generously of their winter stock of potatoes and salt fish to feed the hungry wreck victims such supplies were totally inadequate to meet the

containers had burst open in the surf and their contents were ruined. However, some stock of ship biscuit, flour and rum was salvaged. An outdoor oven was pressed into service to make bread. At the novel and frightening sight of the negro cook of the "PREMIER" in action the women and children of Cap Chat screamed in alarm and fled. However the service of the cook and his assistants was vital in providing the survivors with their first taste of warm food.

#### UNIQUE PORTRAIT OF AN EARLY FISHING VILLAGE

A fascinating glimpse of life in an early, isolated fishing village of Gaspesia's North Coast is provided by the record of the wreck of the "PREMIER" set down by the regimental surgeon, George Dartnell. The isolation of the settlement was astonishing. No roads existed in any direction. The little community had no priest, doctor, or other service. Such religious rites as were necessary were conducted by the village patriarch of 95 years. The interior of the rude homes were smoke blackened and lacked most of the comforts of life. Yet, the people were unfailingly hospitable, kind-hearted and obliging.

#### LIEUT. LYSANS TO QUEBEC

It was urgent that the authorities at Québec be informed of the wreck of the "PREMIER" and the situation of the survivors. The task of carrying dispatches to Major-General Sir James Hope at Québec was entrusted to Lieut. Lysans who set out on foot on the 300 mile trip upriver. No one had any idea how long that journey might take. From Cap Chat to Metis Lieut. Lysans had to make his way along the rocky shore. At Metis he managed to get a horse and sleigh for his onward journey. Driven by awareness that his fellow survivors were depending on him for rescue and ever fearful that another November snowstorm might hold him snowbound, Lieut. Lysans, in a remarkable feat of travel, reached

to send the steamer, "UNICORN", Captain Douglas, Master, and the Military Transport Officer to the rescue at Cap Chat. On the 8th day after Lieut. Lysans had set out for Québec with dispatches the "UNICORN" reached Cap Chat at dawn.

The return of the 2nd battalion, Royal Regiment to Québec was marked by a Service of Thanksgiving at the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity where the sermon was delivered by the Lord Bishop of Québec. Though the wreck of the "PREMIER" might have been officially closed by rescue of the survivors, many of those involved, including the fisher folk of Cap Chat and Ste. Anne des Monts, would long remember the wreck and its consequences.

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WINDING ON THE JUNGLE. BURNING THE JUNGLE. BURNING THE JUNGLE. BURNING THE JUNGLE.

FIG. 2



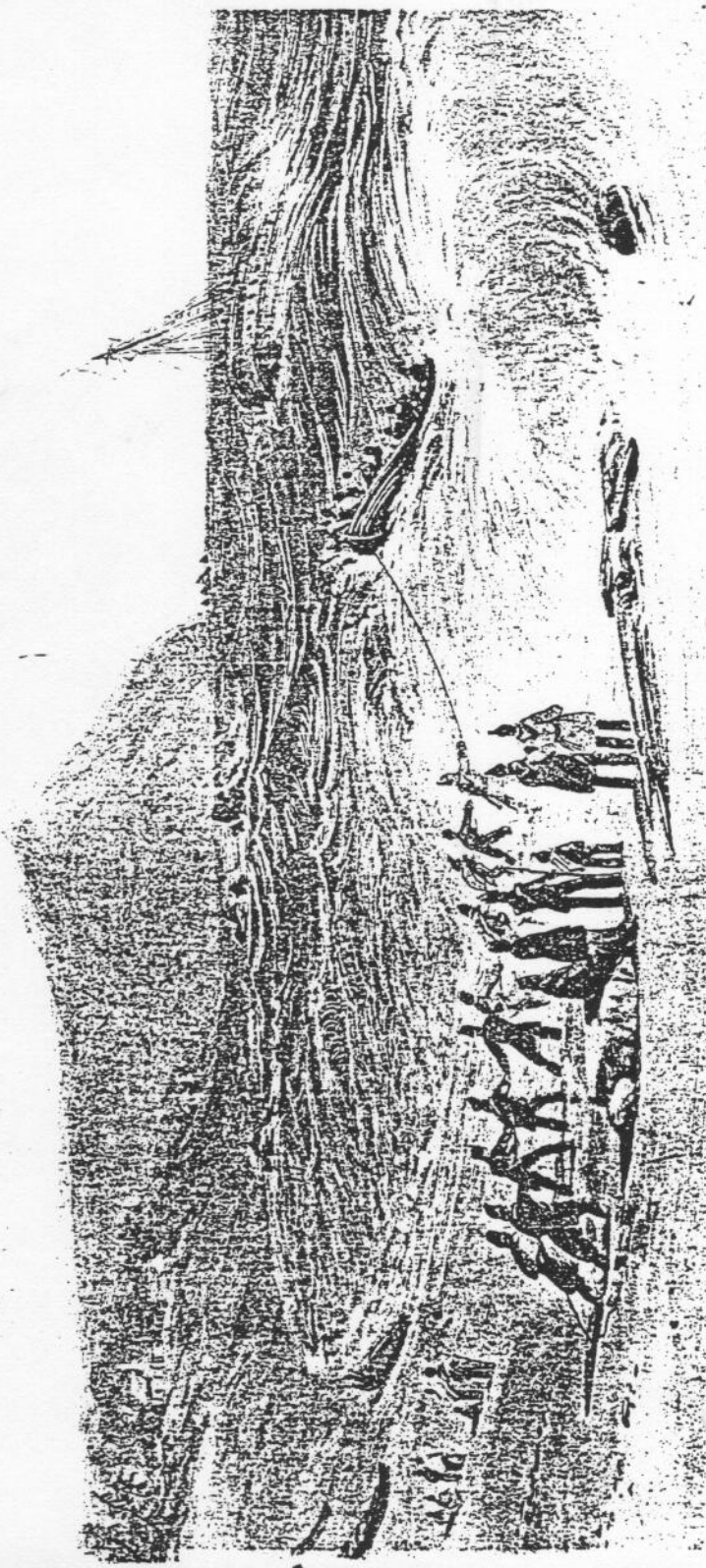
Drawn from Nature by G. Partnell Esq.

PERILOUS POSITION OF THE TREEMAN AT DAYLIGHT

C. Hubbard's Patent Lubricant



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LANDING OF THE TROOPS, WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM THE WRECK