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Brian Tennyson

Cape Breton University, btennyson@ns.sympatico.ca

Roger Sarty

Wilfrid Laurier University, rsarty@wlu.ca

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Sydney, Nova Scotia and the U-Boat War, 1918

Brian Tennyson and Roger Sarty

During the summer of 1918, when German submarines thrust into North American coastal waters, Sydney, Nova Scotia suddenly became a major naval base and Canada's foremost convoy assembly harbour.¹ Nearly a hundred of the Royal Canadian Navy's coastal patrol vessels came to the Cape Breton port, with at least 1,500 crewmen and shore personnel,² but this was not enough. Britain was unable to help. Therefore the United States Navy pitched in for what was the first instance of joint operations by the armed forces of the two North American nations. Some 350 American sailors came to establish base facilities and operate patrol vessels and aircraft assigned to Sydney. Thousands more passed through on ships assembling for convoy. Just as the naval authorities at Sydney had to cope with rapidly changing and increasing operational demands, so too the citizens had to deal with a veritable naval invasion of their town.

Sydney, for most of the First World War, was a small outstation of Halifax. That began to change in 1917 when the success of German submarine attacks on merchant shipping in the eastern Atlantic forced the British Admiralty to sail cargo vessels from North America in defended convoys. Britain depended upon this North American trade for fully 50 per cent of its imports. Sydney, with its large harbour, abundant coal supplies, and strategic location on both the St. Lawrence route and the Great Circle route to Europe, became the assembly port for slow-speed shipping from Canadian and US ports. As many as 50 to 60 vessels appeared for each convoy, which sailed at eight-day intervals.³

In 1917 the danger of submarine attack remained in the eastern Atlantic but that changed in 1918. During the winter the British Admiralty warned that new types of large, long-range submarines would almost certainly begin to strike in Canadian and US waters beginning in the coming spring. The Admiralty, however, had to renege on its long-standing promise to send destroyers, the best type of anti-submarine and convoy escort ship, to help deal with the threat. Small coastal patrol craft were being built in Canada for the Royal Navy, and the British arranged to turn 66 of these over to the Canadian service. The better of these craft were 30 steel trawlers of about 350 tons displacement that carried a light gun and a few depth charges, and could make a best speed of 10 knots. They were, in other words, scarcely a third of the size of a destroyer with considerably less than half the speed and a tiny fraction of the armament. The 36 wooden drifters were smaller still, and had a speed of no more than 9 knots in ideal conditions. Moreover, Canada, having concentrated on raising land forces for the Western Front and curtailed its naval development to about two dozen converted civilian steamers on British advice, would at this late stage in the war be very hard-pressed to find qualified seamen for the 66 craft.⁴

Not surprisingly, Vice-Admiral William Lowther Grant, the British Commander-in-Chief, North America and West Indies and the senior officer responsible for the convoy system in the western Atlantic, was worried. With no help forthcoming from Britain, Grant looked south to the newest member of the Allied coalition. He set up a meeting in Washington between senior Canadian and US Navy officers on 20 April to

see what could be done. The Americans offered six submarine chasers, 110-foot long wooden craft that were somewhat better armed than most of the Canadian vessels, with a much better speed of 16 knots. They also promised to send naval air patrol units to Halifax and Sydney, but this more ambitious scheme would take some time to arrange.⁵ The US Navy submarine chasers arrived at Halifax on 16 May 1918. Feeble as these craft were compared to destroyers, they were the most capable warships available and immediately took up the task of long-range convoy escort. There was much of this work to do in Halifax in the spring of 1918. During the winter freeze-up of the St. Lawrence, the slow convoys, designated "HS," moved from Sydney to Halifax. The latter port was also the year-round assembly point for smaller "HC" convoys of more valuable "medium speed" ships, including troop transports. The American chasers were organized into two divisions of three vessels each, one being responsible for the slow convoy, and the other for the medium speed convoy. The chasers stayed with the convoys for the first twenty-four hours of passage, a distance of 150 to 200 miles. Submarines could most readily lie in wait and make contact with convoys in this critical coastal waters zone, where the ships were most vulnerable as they slowly picked up speed and manoeuvred into cruising formation. The slower Canadian patrol vessels kept a watch at the harbour mouth before and during the departure of the merchantmen, and then did their best to keep up a screen around them for a few hours as they picked up speed.⁶

Meanwhile, during the spring of 1918 work was urgently underway at Sydney to prepare for the vastly increased operations planned for the summer. Buildings were rented or constructed on the waterfront to serve as workshops, storehouses and barracks. The first patrol vessels arrived as soon as they were able to push their way through the ice in late May, and increasing numbers came in the following six weeks. Two-thirds of the new trawlers and drifters were assigned to Sydney, together with the bulk of the most capable armed yachts and civilian steamers that had carried out coastal patrols since earlier in the war. Among the latter were the fisheries patrol vessel *Canada*, the customs vessel *Margaret*, the post office steamer *Lady Evelyn*, the former American seagoing yachts *Stadacona* and *Hochelaga*, and the

hydrographie survey ships *Acadia* and *Cartier*. None of these "auxiliary patrol ships" was as fast as the US chasers, but they were bigger and more seaworthy. They were therefore assigned, together with some of the new trawlers, to a "Mobile Patrol Flotilla," which had the job of filling in for destroyers in the offensive hunting role. The Patrol flotilla was organized into divisions that each included one or two of the larger ships and a pair of trawlers. The task of these divisions was to roam the Gulf of St. Lawrence and waters south of Newfoundland ready to respond to any reports of submarines, or to assist the convoys funnelling out of Halifax and Sydney. The rest of the trawlers and drifters at Sydney were assigned to a "Forming Up Escort and Outer Patrol Flotilla" to screen the HS convoys as they emerged from port and formed up in the Cabot Strait.⁷

The Patrol and Forming Up flotillas began to function in early July, when HS 47, the first convoy of the 1918 season to assemble at Sydney, departed. One division of American submarine chasers, SC 51, SC 183 and SC 241, moved for the season from Halifax to Sydney just in time to provide the long-range escort for this convoy.⁸

In theory this all seemed efficient. The reality was otherwise. One bright spot was the dependability of the US chasers, which were almost unfailingly ready for service and on station when and where they were required. This said a great deal about the ability of the US Navy to produce ships and trained personnel in a hurry. Canada, by contrast, had barely a shadow organization.⁹ Many of the new craft, which formed the bulk of the Sydney fleet, were only completed in the preceding winter and spring, by builders with limited experience, in the midst of the extreme chills and sudden thaws of the St. Lawrence River region that caused hull structures to shrink and expand, opening many leaks. Armament was slow to arrive from Britain, and was still being fitted in many of the vessels as late as August. The only two marine engineering firms of any size, Sydney Foundry and North Sydney Marine Railway, were unequal to the heavy demands thrust upon them, so Sydney-based ships disappeared for days or weeks to yards around the Maritimes or, quite often, struggled out to sea without essential work having been done.¹⁰ The crews were a mixture of older civilian seamen, with little or no naval



HMCS Lansdowne, the name given to the rented waterfront facilities that served as the RCN patrol base at Sydney, NS in the 1918 season. Among the vessels at the wharf are the drifter CD 73, one of the New England trawler-minesweepers (called 'PVs' in RCN service), and the Admiralty trawler TR 33.

(Maritime Command Museum)

experience, and teenagers with even less. Qualified personnel were so thinly spread that they not infrequently jumped from one vessel as it came into port onto another about to sail.

In early August this shaky organization came under extreme pressure. No one expected early trouble. British naval intelligence, which had broken German naval radio codes, knew that the submarine *U-156*, which had arrived in US waters in mid-July, had orders to remain mere.¹¹ What such excellent intelligence could not foresee was an aggressive commander going beyond his orders. That is what happened at the beginning of August. After causing a furore with attacks on shipping in the Gulf of Maine, *U 156* easily eluded the US Navy hunting group that was in pursuit, and suddenly appeared off Halifax on the morning of 5 August, sinking a tanker within 30 miles of the harbour mouth. The Halifax flotilla, which was further out to sea protecting an HC convoy of troopships, could not reach the scene in time. Although everyone breathed a sigh of relief that the transports, carrying 12,000 Canadian and American soldiers, had escaped attack, it was clear that the anti-submarine warships available could not secure the Halifax approaches.¹²

Within hours of the attack on the tanker, Admiral Grant ordered all merchant shipping bound for Halifax to make for Sydney, clear of *U-156's* hunting area. Prior to the appearance of the submarine, medium speed vessels allocated to carry American troops and supplies had loaded at New York, and then gone to Halifax to join up into HC convoys with vessels carrying Canadian troops and cargoes that had loaded at Montreal and Halifax. Henceforth, the Montreal and Halifax ships were to assemble at Sydney and sail so as to rendezvous with the New York ships on the Grand Banks east of Newfoundland, clear of the coastal danger area. This was an operation that required precision and intimate cooperation between shipping and convoy authorities in Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax, New York, Washington, and, of course, Sydney, which bore the ultimate responsibility for getting the Montreal and Halifax ships to sea in good time while also maintaining the large HS convoy series.¹³

Captain Walter Hose, an experienced British naval officer who had transferred to the Canadian service and commanded all the flotillas based at Sydney, now had to rejig the organization he was still laboriously putting into place. He reassigned

the American submarine chaser division, his fastest group, to the long-range escort of the HC convoys and gave responsibility for the HS series to the auxiliary patrol ships and trawlers of the Mobile Patrol Flotilla.¹⁴

The Sydney section of HC 13 — four merchant vessels and the British armed merchant cruiser HMS *Victorian* — sailed on 14 August, only two days later than the usual eight-day cycle, and duly met the New York group on the Grand Banks on the 16th.¹⁵ The whole performance was an impressive demonstration of the efficiency of the shipping control organization after a year's experience with convoy.

The sailing of two ocean convoys every eight days was only part of the increased and unexpected commitments for Sydney in the summer of 1918. Most important among the other new tasks was the escort of groups of high-value merchant ships between Halifax and Sydney, Sydney into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and between Sydney and Newfoundland ports. The system was not formally organized as it would be in the Second World War, but it was comprehensive and, as in the later war, Sydney served as the central hub. Oddly, there is virtually no mention of the coastal convoy system in the policy and operations files but the surviving ships' logs and reports of proceedings, fragmentary as they are, leave no doubt that local escort was a major commitment. The available, sketchy information shows that 13 trawlers and auxiliary patrol vessels carried out 15 local escort missions during the last three weeks of August alone. There is some evidence that the ferry that ran between North Sydney and Port-aux-Basques, Newfoundland, was regularly escorted and conclusive evidence that the St. John's run had a top priority equal to that from Halifax, with groups of two and three escorts being assembled for each voyage. Among the ships shepherded from Sydney to St. John's and back were the vessels that supplied the Sydney and Sydney Mines steel mills with ore from the mines at Wabana in Conception Bay, near St. John's.¹⁶

U-156 had gone back to US waters after the attack off Halifax on 5 August, but then returned to Nova Scotia waters and announced the fact with panache. On 21 August the crew of the

fishing trawler *Triumph* came ashore in boats at Canso, Nova Scotia, with an amazing story. The day before, some 60 miles offshore, the Germans had seized the trawler, run up their ensign, and used the Canadian vessel to attack other fishing craft. Soon scores of fishermen were streaming ashore. This apparently bold action was in fact a desperate one. The tiny fishing vessels were barely worth the time and effort required to sink them, but *U-156* could not pick up any trace of the big ships that were its priority target; all of these had been grouped into the new coastal convoy system and the main transoceanic convoys. On 20 August the 43 merchantmen of HS 52 had sailed from Sydney under the long-range escort of Canadian navy trawlers, and the next day the Canadian section of HC 14 had put out from Sydney under the protection of the US submarine chasers.¹⁷ Thus there was no regular traffic of unprotected major steamers that the submarine had banked on finding, just empty seas.

The allied navies had long anticipated raids on the fishing fleets, but concluded that little could be done. Hundreds of vessels fished in a thousand mile arc from the Gulf of Maine to the Great Bank east of Newfoundland, all following their noses to the best catch. Almost none of the fishing craft carried radios, meaning word of attacks, as in the case of those off Canso and eastern Cape Breton, did not get out until the fishermen had rowed ashore long after the event.¹⁸

Nevertheless, when word reached Sydney on 21 August of the attacks off Canso, wide ranging patrols of the fishing banks immediately became a major new commitment. As the US chasers and Canadian ships returned from escort duty they hurriedly put to sea again.¹⁹ One of these missions, by a division of the Mobile Patrol Flotilla, caught sight of *U-156* in the vicinity of the island of St. Pierre on 25 August. Unfortunately, the lead vessel, HMCS *Hochelaga*, turned away to get support from the other vessels of the division some miles away; by the time the warships returned the U-boat was long gone. Hose was aghast at this evidence of poor training and spirit; *Hochelaga's* commanding officer was court-martialled and dismissed from the service. Privately, senior officers admitted that the tiny patrol vessels would have little chance if one of the big submarines fought back, but that was

no excuse for *Hochelaga*, which could have shaken the morale of the U-boat's crew and possibly even inflicted some damage.²⁰

More importantly, two ocean convoys, HS 53 and HC 15, got safely away from Sydney on 28-29 August. Evidence now available shows that

Scotia" to show no lights after dark. In fact, according to Captain Frederick Pasco, the retired Royal Navy officer who had come out for service in Canada to command the shore establishments and convoy staff at Sydney, these regulations had been in effect for two years but had not been enforced in Sydney because "they would be



SC 242 - One of the six 110-foot wooden American submarine chasers that operated under RCN control in May-November 1918. SC 242 was part of the division that ran fast escort missions from Sydney. In addition to a stern depth charge chute, she carried a "Y" gun, which can be clearly seen on the quarter deck, to fire charges off both beams. Forward is a 6-pounder quick-firing gun.

(Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence Negative CN 3280)

their tracks passed within about 100 miles of the routes *U-156* and a second submarine *U-117* (which kept well out to sea) . Had the 26 ships in the two convoys sailed independently on varying courses at intervals as each became ready for sea, the two submarines would have had a good chance of locating and sinking several of them.²¹

With the naval war being fought so close to Sydney, it is not surprising that steps were taken to tighten up security in the coastal communities. Blackout regulations were imposed in September, requiring "all seaport towns in Nova

obviously ineffective here because of the Steel Company whose lights are blazing all the night and as they could not be extinguished it would serve no good purpose to darken the city."²² As one sea captain asked, "what would be the use of darkened lights in houses and on automobiles in this city when the glare from the steel plant, when slag is being poured, can be observed up to thirty five miles at sea?"²³ At the same time, the detailed published reports on the U-boats' activities gathered by newspapermen who swarmed around seamen from the sunken ships caused mounting concern in naval circles. Accordingly, on 3 September the chief press

ensor at Ottawa notified the telephone companies that "the transmission of information by telephone regarding the movements of submarines off the coast, or efforts taken by the authorities to restrict these activities, is forbidden."²⁴

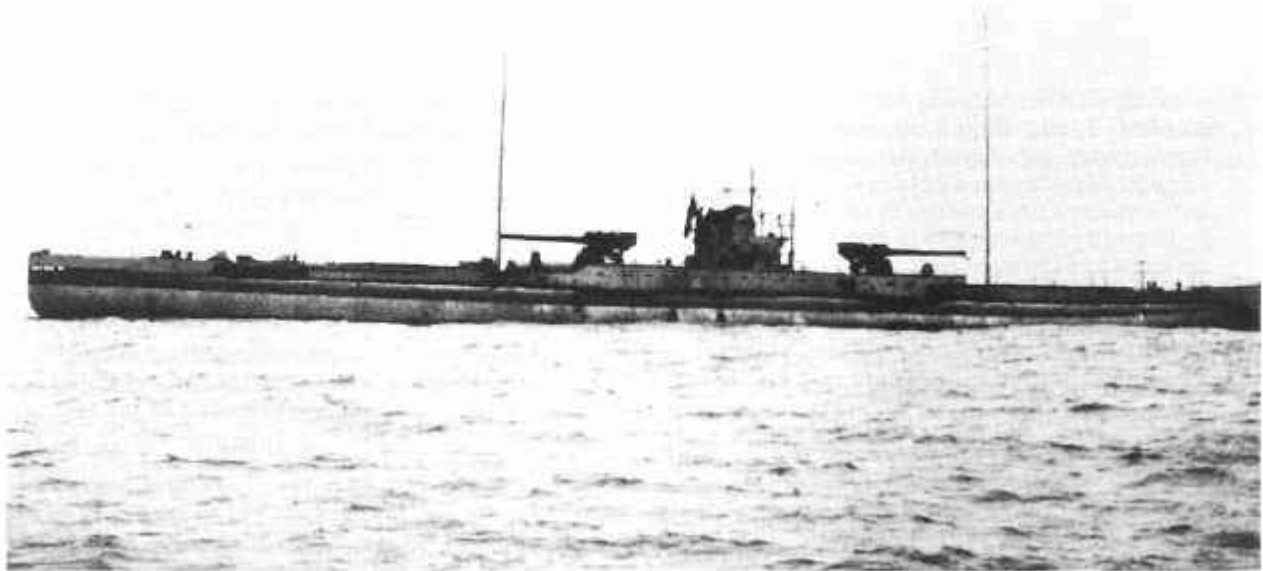
The arrival of the naval war on Cape Breton's doorstep had its greatest impact on life in Sydney with the influx into town of hundreds of seamen on leave. Many of Sydney's citizens joined in undertakings by local service clubs and benevolent organizations to provide badly needed social services to the servicemen and merchant sailors passing through the community. The Navy League, for example, opened tea rooms in the old St. George's rectory on the Esplanade, in July 1918. There the members of the Louisbourg and Yendys chapters of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE), assisted by large numbers of volunteers from the city, catered to anyone who needed a hot meal and comfortable surroundings.²⁵ The doors of the tea rooms were always open and, in addition to a dining area, there were three rooms with newspapers, writing tables and a piano. On cool days fires burned in the grates. "These fires are very cheery and comforting and at times convenient for other purposes than keeping people warm (for instance when electric toasters go awry in the regions of the kitchen and six people are waiting for toast and tea and seven more for poached eggs on toast.)"²⁶

Many servicemen and merchant sailors spent their time at Sydney not on leave but in the local civilian and special military hospitals recovering from wounds or illness. Moxham's castle — a somewhat grandiose romantic mansion built by a former general manager of the Sydney steel plant — had been converted into a temporary war hospital, as had the less dramatic but substantial Ross mansion. Because the Moxham hospital was some distance outside the city, the local authorities organized a regular bus service so that staff and convalescing patients could come into town for business or entertainment. Mary Isobel MacNeil, who worked at the Moxham hospital towards the end of the war, recalled that the men nevertheless "always managed to be home for meals prepared for them by a good cook." She referred particularly to a Mrs.

Lindsay, for whom the soldiers composed a song entitled "Don't bite the hand that feeds you."²⁷

On 11 September "that busy organization," the Business Girls' Club, organized an entertainment "for all the soldier and sailor patients of the Ross and Moxham hospitals." Enlisting the help of "nearly every automobile owner in the city," the women took the staff and patients for a drive "through the scenic sections of the district." There were 18 cars in all and the tour lasted an hour and a half. When they arrived back at the Moxham hospital, a special dinner had been prepared, followed by dancing, pool and billiards. "From the third floor, where the "mumps" moaned at his captivity, to the lower floor where the "wall-flower" mentally wailed his incapacity, interest was taken in the merry waltzing and soft syncopating." The dancing began with a set of lancers and "Piper Norman Ross was the man of the hour with his pipes and Sergt-Major ER Grant with his calling."²⁸ The success of this event encouraged more of the same.²⁹ Here probably lies the origins of the much more ambitious programme by service clubs in Sydney during the Second World War to provide highly popular excursions in the most beautiful and restful parts of the countryside for visiting seamen.

It may be a tribute to the generally welcoming spirit of the citizens that there was only one major disturbance in which servicemen were the main instigators, and this was pretty clearly the result of high-handedness on the part of a couple of policemen. On the evening of Friday, 30 August, a police officer attempted to quiet down some rowdy sailors. One witness reported that "the officer knocked [a] sailor down preparatory to putting the cuffs on him and then the trouble started." Additional policemen arrived and dispersed the seamen. No arrests were made but, according to the press, "some of the sailors were reported to have said that they intend[ed] "cleaning up"" the following night.³⁰ Saturday evening, a crowd of Canadian and American sailors did indeed gather downtown. Some carried "improvised clubs and other weapons...concealed in their clothes." When the police were unable to disperse the crowd, they arrested an American sailor and took him off to the jail. The crowd followed and the police felt compelled to draw their guns to keep it at bay.



U-156, the most aggressive of the German submarines to operate on the coast of Canada and the United States in the summer of 1918. During its seven-week mission in the Western Atlantic, U-156 laid mines that sank the cruiser USS San Diego, destroyed a tanker with torpedoes and gunfire close off Halifax, and captured the Canadian trawler Triumph which, with a crew from the submarine, destroyed several schooners off Canso and Cape Breton. U-156 itself was destroyed on its return voyage, probably in a minefield in the North Sea. (Horst Bredow U-Boot-Rchiv, Sylt, 69-44)

Sticks, bottles and stones flew in all directions and a billiard ball thrown from the window of the YMCA went through CP Moore's shop window on the opposite side of the street. Women, children and civilians followed every move of the crowd and commented, some more emphatically than elegantly, on the different turns of the affair.

A few arrests were made and leave for all American, British and Canadian sailors was cancelled on Sunday. The police chief, JB McCormack, after meeting with naval officers, gave assurances that "there will be little if any trouble of this kind [again]."³¹

Captain Pasco, the commander of the port, set up a committee that included representatives of the naval ships in port to investigate the incident. According to Ensign L.B. Sands, the US Convoy Officer at Sydney, the American sailors "strongly claimed ...that the arrests were largely unjustified," and he accused the Sydney police of "extreme violence...in dealing with our men. All US men who have been arrested are variously bruised and cut, and all claim that this was done at the hands of the police either before actual arrest or during the process of the same." He further reported that several American officers, including Lieutenant Commander Walter May, the commanding officer of the USS *Lake Eckhart*, one of the US Navy vessels in port, spoke to McCormack "but were unable to get

much satisfaction as to the reason for the start of the trouble or the manner in which the men were treated after arrest."³²

Naval authorities were anxious that the clash in the streets should not damage relations either among the services or between the services and the community. When the case went to court a few days later, it was agreed that the payment of damages resulting from the riot and an apology by the American sailors who had caused it would officially end the affair. "War conditions are given as the cause of the decision." Of the Canadian sailors charged, one was fined \$5.75 for his part in the trouble, "having cleared himself of the most serious charges." Two others were charged with breaking and entering Travis' music store. "They are alleged to have broken the window of the store and to have stolen a mandolin. The musical instrument was in the hands of one of the men when arrested." Other Canadian sailors faced several charges, including participating in a riot and carrying concealed weapons.³³ The crews of the two American warships, *Lake Eckhart* and *Lake Benbow*, were assessed \$280 for property damage, which consisted largely of broken plate glass windows.

As the four men arrested and held in detention by the police were also under various charges in addition to the rioting, such as carrying concealed weapons, burglary, and assault upon an officer,

it was decided that this was the best settlement possible, in that should the men have been further tried and found guilty, outside the damage, heavy fines would have been imposed, and perhaps a jail sentence in addition, to say nothing of their absences from their ships, which are already undermanned.³⁴

The American naval officers were so outraged at the behaviour of the police, however, that they continued to urge an investigation of the force. Sands, recognizing that "sentiment is more or less against the Navy," advised against it, an opinion that Pasco shared. McCormack gave assurances that the two police officers about whom the Americans were complaining would be disciplined "and that all of his men will be specially ordered to use no harsh or unnecessary measures on any of our men who may subsequently be taken under arrest. He is ready to personally guarantee this and be responsible for the treatment our men receive from now on."³⁵

The US Navy subsequently restricted shore leaves in Sydney "to only a limited number of men at a time, and no liberty [was] to extend beyond twelve o'clock, and patrols must be sent ashore to assist in handling our men." This applied to the crews of the submarine chasers as well as to the warships and naval transports putting into port for convoy.³⁶

If the violence in the streets damaged relations between the town and the armed forces, the effects were soon mended under sad circumstances in which the citizens rendered generous service. The Spanish influenza epidemic which swept the western world, killing an estimated twenty million people, arrived in Sydney. On 22 September 500 infected American sailors were brought ashore and, with the hospitals overflowing, the Sydney Curling Club's rink on George Street and five church halls were put to use as temporary wards to accommodate them.³⁷ By the 30th the hockey arena was being cleaned and fitted up as well.³⁸ On 4 October the *Post* reported that there had been four fatalities among the sailors but "these were men who were practically beyond hope when they landed from the ship." A United States Army medical officer who came to help organize the effort³⁹ spoke "in the highest terms" of the treatment which the American sailors received at Sydney "and of the consideration shown by the regular staff of doctors and nurses' at the Moxham hospital.

"Everything was done," he said, "that could possibly have been done for their comfort and convenience." Indeed, he thought it "a big thing that we should have allowed these sick men to land in Sydney and be cared for in the hospitals at much inconvenience and some danger to the people."

He mentioned very particularly the kindness received from the ladies of the town, the gracious sympathy shown by the President of the Red Cross Society and the practical help given through the members, as well as from private sources. Soup, custards, ice-cream and other delicacies have been sent to the sick men in abundance. They are without a grievance and all unite in their praise of Sydney hospitality.⁴⁰

The influenza epidemic spread to the general population, though whether it had come from the sailors or arrived by other means is unclear. Within two weeks the schools, theatres and churches in Sydney were closed.⁴¹ Only at the end of October did the number of new cases fall off.⁴²

Pervasive as the epidemic was at Sydney, it did not hit any of the naval establishments and warship divisions severely enough to interfere with operations. These continued at full intensity. The knowledge from radio intercepts that another submarine, *U-155*, would be arriving about mid-September with orders to operate against the Halifax and St. John's traffic, and that two additional submarines had been assigned to North American waters allowed no respite. Convoy escort duties, moreover, became increasingly challenging.

The difficult high seas junction of separate Sydney and New York sections of the HC convoys had only been an interim measure. Intelligence indications were that the U-boats would continue to focus on the Halifax area, and moreover would plant mines, a form of attack to which the port was particularly vulnerable. The width of the continental shelf off central Nova Scotia made mining of the shipping routes possible 100 miles and further out to sea. At Sydney, by contrast, where the shelf falls quickly away into the deep Cabot Strait trench, mining was not nearly so grave a threat. The Admiralty had therefore ordered medium-speed transports that had previously loaded at Halifax and New York to go to Montreal. They would then assemble for convoy at Quebec City, and could sail north

through the Strait of Belle Isle, completely clear of the danger area off Nova Scotia and southern Newfoundland. The Canadian navy protested vehemently, knowing that the Gulf of St. Lawrence, with its constricted routes, was one area where convoy might not help ships evade submarines, but rather lead them into traps at the many choke points. What if another U-boat commander, like that of *U-156*, disregarded his orders and pushed into the gulf? The British insisted, but released to the Canadian service some additional drifters and trawlers building for the Royal Navy in Canada so that permanent patrols could be organized at the choke points off Gaspe and in the Strait of Belle Isle. This was yet another task that had to be organized by Captain Hose's Sydney command.⁴³

Arrangements for HC 16, the first convoy to assemble at Quebec, were a compromise. In deference to the Americans, and for the last time, a separate section sailed from New York. The Admiralty had intended that the Quebec section should nevertheless sail north of Newfoundland, but agreed to the southern route through the Cabot Strait because the new Strait of Belle Isle patrol was not yet in place.⁴⁴ The nine transports and British cruiser HMS *Cumberland* of the Quebec group of HC 16 sailed on 4 September. Scrambling with only last minute notice because of the many changes in plan, Hose managed to have three of his auxiliary patrol ships meet the convoy north of the Magdalenes on 6 September.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the US submarine chasers from Sydney waited at the western entrance of the Cabot Strait to lend further support, but never made contact; a building gale severely battered the light wooden vessels and they spent a harrowing night taking heavy seas aboard, not daring to attempt to approach the coast until the wild conditions subsided the next day.⁴⁶ The New York and Quebec sections successfully rendezvoused east of Newfoundland on the 9th, but 32 hours late because of the weather and the appearance of icebergs.⁴⁷

Arrangements — and the weather — were more settled for HC 17. This was the first convoy, which included 15 merchant vessels and the armed liner HMS *Orvieta*, entirely to assemble at Quebec. It departed on 13 September and, having had proper notice this time, Hose sent his fastest auxiliary patrol ships, *Lady Evelyn*, *Margaret* and *Stadacona*, in time to meet it on

the 14th off Gaspé. They carried on with the convoy up through the Strait of Belle Isle, a journey of nearly 400 miles, before turning back for Sydney on the 16th.⁴⁸

The smoothness with which this and the following medium-speed convoys made the challenging northern passage reflected well on the crews of the merchant ships and their Canadian escorts, but also the Canadian staffs at Sydney, Halifax, Montreal and Quebec City that had executed the direction of the senior British command.⁴⁹ The difficulty of the northern passage may explain why, despite initial British hopes the HS series would enter the gulf from Sydney and also proceed out the Strait of Belle Isle, these slow convoys continued to sail directly out into the Atlantic south of Newfoundland. These convoys were two to four times larger than the HC series, and their creeping 7-knot speed made the vessels less manoeuvrable than the 11 to 12 knot transports, a potentially fatal disadvantage on the tricky northern route.⁵⁰ To compensate for the danger of attack on the southern route revealed by the decoded U-boat signals, Hose reorganized his escort force yet again to provide stronger protection. Freed from responsibility for the HC transports, the US submarine chasers now screened the HS series, in combination with the slower auxiliary patrol ships *Cartier*, *Acadia*, and *Hochelaga*, and two or three trawlers.⁵¹

With the auxiliary patrol ships now committed to the ocean convoys, their previous tasks of coastal escort and special patrols fell to the trawlers. During September, with some transfers from Halifax and the completion of additional new construction, the strength of the trawler force at Sydney increased to 29 vessels.⁵² The drifter force of the Sydney command had meanwhile grown to 40, with others temporarily attached to help with the multiplying demands for standing patrols — at St. John's, Newfoundland and the Canso Strait, in addition to those in the gulf, and the original and still priority commitment for coverage in the Cabot Strait. Inadequate facilities to deal with "shake down" problems of the new construction, and heavy wear on the craft that had arrived early in the season meant that breakdowns continued to trouble the flotilla, not to mention fatigue among the crews for whom there were few if any relief personnel.⁵³

A welcome reinforcement was the long-promised US Navy seaplane unit, which began to arrive at the end of August. The 250 American personnel from the US Naval Reserve Flying Corps under the command of Lieutenant Robert Donahue of the US Coast Guard established a temporary base at Indian Beach at North Sydney, where they immediately ran up the stars and stripes. The officers were quartered in town while the men were housed in tents provided by the Canadian army. The gale on 7 September that had caused the submarine chasers such a terrifying night in the Cabot Strait, flattened the tents and damaged the first of the Curtiss HS2L seaplanes that the airmen were then assembling. This setback was quickly overcome, and one machine began test flights on the 11th, causing a local sensation.⁵⁴ "Many people," according to the *Post*, "are suffering from sore necks" after rushing about and straining to keep the aircraft in view.⁵⁵

The first operational flights took place on 22 September when two machines each flew for about two and a half hours, covering HS 56 as it sailed. By early October, when a total of four aircraft were operational and two more had been delivered, coverage was possible on the full scale that had been planned. As HS 58 formed up and sailed on the 8th, three aircraft flew a total of five missions that provided constant air cover from 1000 hours until 1730 hours when the convoy was about 60 miles out to sea. One of the aircraft suffered engine trouble that forced it to put down offshore but, despite the heavy swell, trawlers of the Canadian flotilla soon rescued the airmen and towed in the aircraft before it had suffered any serious damage. Convoy coverage continued on the scale given to HS 58 during the rest of October.

The camp at Indian Beach was only a stopgap while work was carried out on the permanent site at nearby Kelly's Beach, where the water approaches had to be dredged and the ground needed filling and levelling. Construction of the buildings, three three-storey units, had to be quick and of top quality because the US Navy had made the early provision of "permanent" accommodation for its men a precondition for the dispatch of the air units to a northern climate so late in the season. Indeed, the US Navy Department insisted upon the use of its standard designs, which featured full concrete basements

and steam heating plants. The beginning of this work was delayed until September because the Department of Public Works, which was responsible for the project, hesitated to award such expensive contracts when tarpaper huts set on sills on the ground and heated by coal stoves were considered adequate for Canadian personnel.⁵⁶ Once started, progress was rapid even though, as one weekly report put it, "the very bad weather has turned the site into a quagmire."⁵⁷ By late October, one of the two planned hundred-man barracks and a large stores building were nearly complete and the basements of a mess hall and the second barracks were finished.⁵⁸ The performance of both the American aviation personnel and the Canadian building contractor's crews were all the more impressive in view of the fact that an influenza epidemic hit the camp in late September, causing at least two deaths among the Americans.⁵⁹ The Canadian navy department immediately rented several houses in town to enable the American personnel to move out of the unhealthy tents and sheds at Indian Beach.⁶⁰ The large and costly undertaking at North Sydney and the similar development at Baker Point, Dartmouth — the origin of the present Canadian Forces air station Shearwater — were intended to lay the foundations for a still greater effort in 1919 when it seemed certain the U-boats would return in greater numbers and operate more aggressively. Additional air defences planned included both self-propelled dirigible and escort-towed observation balloons, and the establishment of sub-stations Cape Sable, Canso, Cape North or the Magdalen Islands, and in the vicinity of the Strait of Belle Isle. The Royal Canadian Naval Air Service, which had begun to organize in the fall of the 1918, would ultimately take over these operations, using the equipment supplied by the Americans.⁶¹

Similarly, the Canadian navy regarded the hastily assembled organization at Sydney as merely a beginning and not a very satisfactory one. An exhausted, frustrated Hose made it clear that his fleet, its supporting facilities, and the haphazard manner of providing and training personnel would all have to be completely overhauled. Most importantly, better warships were essential, and during the fall of 1918 senior officers and the Canadian government pressed the British and Americans hard for the provision of destroyer type escorts in 1919.⁶² Fortunately,

U-156's inshore operations and the less destructive cruise offshore by *U-117* in August proved to be the worst that was coming in 1918. Although *U-155* arrived in the Halifax approaches in mid-September, it lay low, unable to find much shipping. Two small minefields planted by the submarine did no damage before the Canadian forces discovered them. Ignoring orders to push further into the Canadian area, the boat had then moved to the US coast. The two submarines following *U-155* did not in fact press on beyond the central Atlantic.⁶³

Victory celebrations got under way early in Sydney. A premature announcement on 7 November that "the Hun had finally crawled into his hole,"⁶⁴ and another on the 10th caused spontaneous festivities in the streets. The actual news of the armistice on the morning of the 11th seemed somewhat anti-climatic.⁶⁵ Organized events on the 12th fully restored the festive mood. The crews of the US submarine chasers gave a dance at a hall in downtown Sydney "that will long be remembered by those who were fortunate enough to attend it," because of the exposure to the latest trends in popular music south of the border. Among the entertainers was seaman Jones who "sang the American "Rag" songs in an inimitable manner and was compelled to respond to each solo several times. It was a new thing to most of the people there and they enjoyed it immensely." The dance music was provided by a jazz band and, in the words of the *Post*, "they certainly did put some "pep" into it."⁶⁶

At North Sydney the victory celebrations got a little out of hand. Following Thanksgiving services at several of the churches, followed by a parade of the school children "in which the firemen and a number of American naval men and aviators took part," the festivities concluded in the evening with a large bonfire at the ballast ground where the kaiser was burned in effigy. During the evening, unfortunately, there were "several clashes between returned soldiers and American sailors" on Commercial Street, apparently the only serious incidents of violence.

Several arrests were made of disturbers on both sides of the argument, and the climax was reached about eleven o'clock when some person set fire to a mattress in the jail, which necessitated *the* calling out of the firemen. Little damage was done by the fire, but one soldier was nearly overcome by the smoke.⁶⁷

A thrilling, if brief, epoch in the city's history symbolically came to an end on 25 November when the officers and men of the naval base hosted a farewell dance at Sydney's hockey arena. More than 1,100 guests, "everybody and his wife and a lot of others with other peoples' wives," as the *Post* put it, were in attendance. Special tram cars were run to Whitney Pier at 1:30 am to take home guests from that area, while a special ferry operated from North Sydney for the occasion.

There were men in uniforms of all descriptions and ranks of the army and navy, American and Canadian alike allied themselves for the evening's fun and all thought of the war was forgotten. People who had not danced for years forgot that they were too old to dance and after sitting out for a time they were seen to move gingerly, at first, about the floor, and then they danced with all their old time vim.

The arena was transformed for the occasion into "a fairyland" with streamers of coloured lights, flags and bunting. At the rear was a huge union jack and across the centre was Nelson's famous signal, "England expects everyone to do his duty," and as the *Post* said, "everybody did...The affair will long be remembered as one of the most enjoyable ever in the city." At the close of the evening,

three cheers were given for Mr Menzies and the bandsmen and the members of the Jazz Band orchestra, who gave their services free for the evening. After these one of the navy men called for cheers for Sydney and these were given with a heartiness which left little doubt as to the warm feeling that Sydney holds in the hearts of the men of the navy of both services. On the other hand they have made friends and they have most of them won the respect and liking of the people of the city.⁶⁸

On the following morning, Captain James Turnbull, the acting port convoy officer, officially closed the Sydney convoy office, though not before formally thanking the harbour's pilots for "the smart way in which they have cooperated with me in the sailing of the convoys."⁶⁹ That same day the naval patrol organization at Sydney received instructions to discontinue operations and proceed to Halifax.⁷⁰ The hundreds of servicemen from Canada, Britain and the United States would very quickly be gone and the naval base and harbour fortifications would be dismantled, presumably never to be resurrected

if this had indeed been the war to end war. Twenty years later, of course, Sydney would again be invaded by even greater numbers of soldiers, airmen, and seamen from Canada, Britain and the United States and other nations as well. They would stay much longer — six years. The American and British presence would be transient, however, as the Canadian forces controlled and provided most of what was needed for Sydney's much greater part in the Second World War.

Notes

1. There is a surprisingly brief account of the east coast flotilla of 1918 in G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada. Its Official History. Vol. I: Origins and Early Years* (Ottawa, 1952), pp.249-58. There are fuller accounts in Roger Sarty, "Hard Luck Flotilla: The RCN's Atlantic coast patrol, 1914-18," in W.A.B. Douglas, éd., *The RCN in Transition 1910-1985* (Vancouver, 1988), pp. 110-25 and Michael L. Hadley & Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots & Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Montreal & Kingston, 1991), chs.9-12. These general accounts necessarily focus on Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa and the main base and command centre in Halifax.
2. This is a very conservative estimate. The basic planning document of early 1918 for the whole of the east coast patrols laid down requirements for ships' crews and shore support personnel (exclusive of command staffs) at approximately 2,250. (National Archives of Canada [NAC], RG 24, vol. 3831, NS 1017-10-1 pt 1, "Memorandum on Organization of Atlantic Patrols," nd, but forwarded by deputy minister of the Naval Service to under-secretary of state for External Affairs, 8 March 1918.) About two-thirds of the organization was at Sydney, giving the figure 1,500. The scanty information available in surviving administrative files suggests that expansion of the flotilla generally kept to this plan. However, additional vessels were assigned to Sydney during the season, and a rough calculation of the crews for only the principal ships (seven auxiliary patrol ships with about 60 personnel each, 29 trawlers at 20 personnel each and 40 drifters with nine to 12 personnel each) gives nearly 1,500, a figure that does not include shore establishments and harbour and other support craft. The true number might be as high as 2,000.
3. United Kingdom, Public Record Office (PRO), Admiralty records (ADM) 137/2658, "History of Canadian Convoy Organization," 2 December 1918 is the most detailed account.
4. Hadley and Sarty, *TinPots*, pp.187-8, 209-15.
5. Hadley and Sarty, *TinPots*, pp.215-17.
6. Hadley and Sarty, *TinPots*, pp.235-6.
7. Because the reports of proceedings files for the east coast during the First World War were destroyed, information about the numbers of vessels available and their organization must be gleaned from several sources. Sketch notes of the contents of some of the lost files made by members of the naval historical section during the 1950s are particularly useful: notes from NS 1057-4-31, in National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Naval Historical Section files (NHS) 8000 "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2; notes from NS 1047-5-25 in DHH 81 /520/1440-6, "Halifax 1905-20." See also NAC RG 24, vol. 7953, TR 30 log, 1 July-12 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7953, TR32 log, May-July 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7493, Margaret log, July 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7444, Lady Evelyn log, July 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NS 1065-7-6, Kingsmill to secretary of the Admiralty, 18 July 1918.
8. US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 24, SC-51 log.
9. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin Pots*, p.224.
10. NAC RG 24, vol. 3832, NS 1017-10-4, Kingsmill to minister, nd [March 1918]; NAC RG 24, vol. 5657, NS 58-9-4, Hose to secretary, Department of the Naval Service, 19 August 1918.
11. The deciphered radio traffic for the long-range submarines to the end of July 1918 are in PRO ADM 137/4155; the U-boat headquarters signal of 22 July 1918 directing U-156 to operate in the Gulf of Maine with the Delaware approaches as alternate is on pp.432 and 451. See also Historical Section, Office of Naval Records Library, *German Submarine Activities on the Atlantic Coast of the United States and Canada* (Washington 1920), pp.10-11
12. On U-156's operations in Canadian and US waters see *German Submarine Activities*, pp.52-9; Sarty, "Hard luck flotilla," pp. 114-16; Hadley & Sarty, *Tin-Pots*, pp.248-57.
13. PRO ADM 137/903, Commander in Chief, North America & West Indies [Britannia] "war warning" signal 418, 0225/6 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 3773, NSS 48-48-1 pt 4, Britannia to Naval Ottawa, signal 101, 0359/5 [actually 6] August 1918, Naval Ottawa to Britannia, signal 1735, 6 August 1918, Britannia to Naval Ottawa, signal 104, 1908/6 August 1918.
14. NAC RG 24, vol. 3775, NSS 1048-48-12, Patrols Sydney to Naval Ottawa, signal 839, 1530/9 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 3773, NSS 1048-48-1 pt 4, same to same, signal 863, 2145/11 August 1918.
15. PRO ADM 137/2566, Walter, letter of proceedings for HMS Victorian, 25 August 1918.
16. NAC RG 24, vol. 7493, Margaret log; NAC RG 24, vol. 7871, Stadacona log; NAC RG 24, vol. 7040, Armentieres log; notes from NS 1057-4-31 in DHH, NHS 8000, "Armentieres"; notes from NS 1057-4-30 in DHH, NHS 8000, "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2; NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NS 1065-7-1, Hose to secretary, Department of the Naval Service, 30 August 1918. The *Sydney Daily Post*, 23 November 1918, reported that the ferries "made their trips under strong convoy."
17. Entries for 18-20 August 1918 in notes from NS 1057-4-30, DHH, NHS 800, "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2; NARA, RG 24, SC 51 log, 20-1 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7040, Armentieres log, 20-2 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7953, TR 30 log, 20-1 August 1918.
18. Hadley and Sarty, *TinPots*, pp.218-20.
19. NAC RG 24, vol. 7953, TR 30 log, 23-6 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7040, Armentieres log, 23-29 August 1918; entry for 23 August 1918 in notes on NS 1057-4-30, DHH, NHS 8000, "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2.
20. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin Pots*, pp.268-9. See also a published account sympathetic to the patrol ship commander, but which identifies him by a pseudonym, *Sydney Daily Post*, 25 November 1918.
21. NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NSS 1065-7-1, Hose to Secretary, Department of Naval Service, 30 August 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7444, Lady Evelyn log, 29-30 August 1918; U-

- 11 //log, pp.30-1 August 1918, copy courtesy of Professor Michael Hadley. On the 31st the submarine passed through position 48 degrees 6 minutes north, 48 degrees 3 minutes west. HC 15's rendezvous that same day was at 45 degrees 5 minutes north, 48 degrees 35 minutes west. PRO ADM 137/2567. Blacklin (convoy commodore), "Report of Proceedings HC 15," 9 September 1918.
22. Quoted in *Sydney Daily Post*, 23 November 1918.
23. *Ibid.*, 30 September 1918.
24. *Ibid.*, 4 September 1918.
25. *Sydney Daily Post*, 31 July 1918.
26. *Ibid.*, 21 September 1918.
27. Quoted in unsigned, "Magnificent Moxham's Castle in Sydney used as a convalescent hospital in WWI," *Cape Breton Post*, 9 November 1985.
28. *Sydney Daily Post*, 12 September 1918.
29. *Ibid.*, 14 and 21 September 1918.
30. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1918.
31. *Ibid.*, 3 September 1918.
32. NAR ARG 38, entry 198, box 2, file R-3/1, Sands to Hines, US Naval Representative, Halifax, 1 September 1918.
33. *Sydney Daily Post*, 5 September 1918.
34. *Ibid.*, NARA, RG 38, entry 198, box 2, file R-3/1, Sands to Hines, 5 September 1918. The ships' officers were subsequently ordered to charge the \$280 "against the men who damaged the property, and also to take proper disciplinary measures against them, as this point may not have been impressed upon them owing to the departure of the convoy from Sydney." *Ibid.*, Hines to Director of Naval Intelligence, Washington, 7 September 1918.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, Hines to Sands, 9 September 1918.
37. *Sydney Daily Post*, 23 September 1918.
38. *Ibid.*, 30 September 1918.
39. *Ibid.*, 4 October 1918.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 11 October 1918.
42. *Ibid.*, 28 October 1918.
43. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin Pots*, p.282, and especially the sources noted on p.363, note 62.
44. NAC RG 24, vol. 3775, NSS 1048-48-10, Washington, DC [Britannia] to Naval Ottawa, signal 182, 23 August 1918, same to same, signal 188, 24 August 1918, PRO ADM 137/1620, Chambers to Britannia, 2 September 1918; PRO ADM, 137/2658, "History of Canadian Convoy Organization," pp. 124-5.
45. NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NSS 1065-7-6, signals between Naval Ottawa and Patrols Sydney, 3-5 September 1918, especially Patrols to Naval, signal 179, 5 September 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7871, *Stadacona* log, 4-6 September 1918, NAC RG 24, vol. 7471, *Margaret* log, 4-6 September 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7493, *Lady Evelyn* log, 4-6 September 1918.
46. NARA, RG 24. SC 51 log, 6-7 September 1918.
47. PRO ADM 137/2567, Blackett, "Letter of Proceedings HMS *Cumberland*," 16 September 1918, Chambers to Britannia, 12 September 1918.
48. PRO ADM 137/2567, England, "HC 17 Report of Proceedings," nd, incorrectly states that it was *Margaret* that shepherded a straggler to Sydney. See NAC RG 24, vol. 7871, *Stadacona* log, 13-16 September 1918; NAC RG 24, vol. 7493. *Margaret* log, 13-17 September 1918.
49. PRO ADM 137/2658, "History of Canadian Convoy Organisation," p. 126.
50. In 1941, when the U-boat menace off Cape Race was greater than in 1918, the navy sailed large slow convoys through the Strait of Belle Isle but at a heavy cost.
51. HS convoy letters of proceedings are in PRO ADM 137/2544. NAC RG 24, vol. 7040, *Armentières* log, 13-15 September 1918; entries for 15, 29-30 September, 8, 23 October 1918 in notes from NS 1057-4-30 pt 2, DHH, NHS 8000, "Trawlers and Drifters."
52. NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NSS 1065-7-6, Hose to Secretary, Department of Naval Service, 1 August 1918; same to same, 13 September 1918; notes from NS 1047-5-25 in DHH, NHS 1440-6, "Halifax NS 1905-20"; notes from NS 1057-4-30 in DHH, NHS 8000, "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2.
53. In addition to the sources in the preceding note, see NAC RG 24, vol. 4031, NSS 1065-7-6, Naval Service Headquarters command memorandum to Captain of Patrols Sydney and Admiral Superintendent Halifax, 3 September 1918, Hose to Secretary, Department of Naval Service, 22 October 1918, Department of Naval Service, "Drifters Built in Canada," 3 March 1919.
54. The account in this and the following paragraph is based on NARA, RG 24, US Naval Air Station, North Sydney log; and DHH, NHS 1700-219, "RCNAS 1918-20," RCNAS weekly reports; and notes on NS 1047-2-4 pt 3, DHH, NHS 1440-6, "Halifax NS 1905-20."
55. *Sydney Daily Post*, 17 September 1918.
56. The American insistence on top quality accommodation and the resistance of the Department of Public Works is fully documented in DHH 77/58, pt 20, file 63-10-1. See especially pp 106-9, 123, 130-1, 134-6.
57. DHH, NHS 1700-219, "RCNAS 1918-1920," "Royal Canadian Naval Air Service events for week ending 12 October 1918."
58. *Ibid.*, for weeks ending 12-26 October 1918. Only the two buildings were completed by war's end.
59. *Ibid.* for weeks ending 30 September, 5 October, 19 October 1918.
60. DH 77/58 pt 14, file 63-5-1, Desbarats to Deputy Minister of Public Works, 1 October 1918, Norrington to Director of Stores, 18 December 1918, Campbell to Ballantyne, 21 January 1919.
61. JDF Kealy & EC Russell, *A History of Canadian Naval Aviation 1918-1962* (Ottawa, 1967), pp.5-6.
62. Hadley & Sarty, *Tin-Pots*, pp.292-7.
63. *German Submarine Activities*, pp. 11-12, 101-19; Hadley and Sarty, *TinPots*, pp.283-8.
64. *Sydney Daily Post*, 8 November 1918.
65. Elva E. Jackson, *Windows on the Past North Sydney, Nova Scotia* (Windsor, 1974), pp.133-4.
66. *Sydney Daily Post*, 14 November 1918.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, 26 November 1918.
69. James Turnbull to FC Kimber (Secretary, Sydney Harbour Pilot Commission), 26 November 1918, quoted in *Sydney Daily Post*, 27 November 1918.
70. *Sydney Daily Post*, 27 November 1918. Ships had in fact begun to move from Sydney to Halifax for winter operations as early as 30 October: see entries for 31 October to 19 December 1918, notes on file 1057-4-31, DHH, NHS, 8000 "Trawlers and Drifters," pt 2.

Brian Tennyson teaches Canadian history at the University College of Cape Breton. Roger Sarty is an historian with the Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence, in Ottawa.