

The Sinking of the SS Carolus near Metis; the role of Octave Gendron, Lighthousekeeper

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CARGO ALLIE COULE PAR UN SOUS-MARIN DANS LE FLEUVE PRES DE METIS-BEACH, LE 8 OCTOBRE

12 marins disparus.— 18 rescapés.— Le sous-marin n'a pas été vu.

OTTAWA.— L'hon. Angus-L. Macdonald, ministre de la défense nationale pour les services navals, a annoncé hier, 15 octobre, la perte d'un vaisseau allié dans le fleuve St-Laurent, près de Métis.

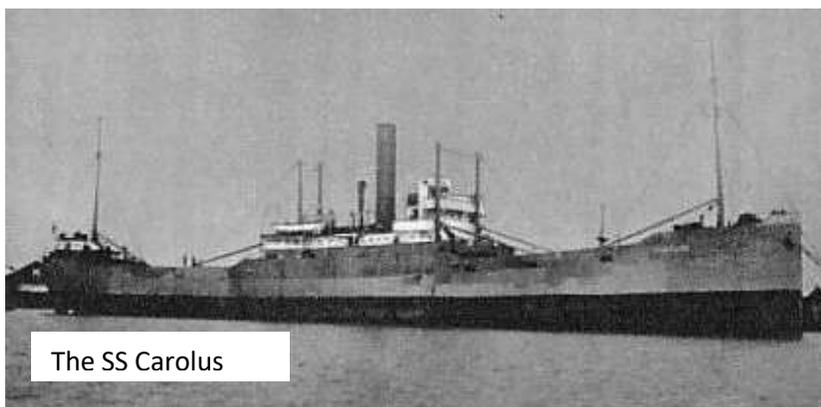
Le navire a été torpillé et coulé par un sous-marin allemand il y a quelques jours. Dix-huit hommes de l'équipage ont été sauvés et douze autres manquent à l'appel. Le sous-marin n'a pas été vu.

L'hon. M. Macdonald a dit que cette dernière attaque dans le St-Laurent est une nouvelle preuve de l'expansion des activités de sous-marins ennemis, ce qui ajoute à la tâche déjà lourde de la marine royale du Canada.

Depuis 3 mois plusieurs navires ont été coulés dans le fleuve. Mais le dernier incident a surpris les habitants de la côte, surtout M. Octave Gendron, le gardien du phare de Métis, qui habite avec sa famille sur une pointe, à une quinzaine de milles de l'endroit où le torpillage est arrivé.

Des communiqués antérieurs ont divulgué le coulage de 9 autres vaisseaux dans le Saint-Laurent, l'avarie d'un autre. Mais les autres attaques ont eu lieu en aval, surtout autour du Cap Chat

Le 10 juillet 1942, le gardien en poste à l'époque, Octave Gendron, observe un U-boot au large de Métis et rapporte le fait au ministère de la Défense et à la base aérienne de Mont-Joli. Le 9 octobre 1942, Octave Gendron est réveillé par une explosion. Il pense alors que le phare est attaqué et obtient immédiatement la permission du commandant de Mont-Joli d'éteindre le feu. L'explosion est en fait causée par le torpillage du SS Carolus, un vapeur de 2245 tonnes, par le U-69, près de Pointe-aux-Senelles au nord-ouest de Métis. Le navire marchand sombre rapidement, entraînant la noyade de 11 membres d'équipage.[...] <https://www.tribull1.com/2016-05-27 - Tour de la Gaspésie 2.html>



Verdun Boy Sub Victim

J. Milmine, 16, Missing
After-Craft Torpedoed

(From Yesterday's Late Edition)
SIXTEEN - YEAR - OLD John Milmine, of 30 Third avenue, Verdun, is one of the 12 members of the crew of the merchant vessel sunk last Thursday in the St. Lawrence at Metis Beach, who have been reported missing. His father, James Milmine, is on active service overseas.

One of the surviving members of the crew described the loss of Milmine and the first shock.

"They were overcome by shock when the torpedo hit," he related. "We were asleep. We were thrown on the floor and the ceiling and door seemed to be coming in on us. But we crawled through a hole to the alley leading to the deck. Kirkson (the cook) and the boy seemed unable to move from shock. I got to the boat deck and then I was pulled on a raft."

Described by his uncle, Duncan Milmine, as "a game little devil" who had long set his heart on going to sea, John was too impatient to wait until he was old enough to join the Royal Canadian Navy, and last summer made up his mind to ship on a freighter to get some experience in the meantime.

Had Made 2 Voyages

Signing up about three months ago, he had already completed two voyages, one to London and the other to Iceland and was returning from his third. Previous to this he had been an active member of the Sea Cadets for a long period.

Born in Montreal, he was educated at Rushbrooke and Villa LaSalle schools. His father is blacksmith in the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, has been on active service overseas for the past 18 months. An uncle, Joseph Milmine, served with the Royal Navy throughout the Great War on board H.M.S. Lord Nelson, while another uncle, S/Sgt. Hugh Milmine, is on active service with the Royal Army Medical Corps.

"We are still hoping that he has been rescued," his uncle said today. "He had it all arranged that he would make another voyage and then be home to spend Christmas with his family."

Besides his parents, other immediate members of his family are four brothers, Ronald, Garth, William and Bruce; a sister, Caroline, and his grandmother, Mrs. John Milmine.

Three-times lucky, the last of the three off the SS Carolus

Bob Dawson was working in the aircraft industry when war broke out. When he tried to enlist he was told he could not join because of his civilian job at Vickers Industry in **Montreal**. When he again attempted to join the Royal **Canadian** Navy and was asked where he worked, Bob said that he was unemployed—and he was then accepted into the DEMS (Defensively Equipped **Merchant Ship**) section of the Navy. People such as Bob spent "their war" sailing the seas and manning the

guns aboard **merchant** ships. Bob joined the navy in October 1939 and took his gunnery training in Halifax.

Bob Dawson had the distinction of having survived three sinkings by German U-boats. The first two occasions were in the Atlantic and the third was in the St. Lawrence River. According to Naval records, U-69 was based in Western France, whence it sailed on its fifth mission on August 16, **1942** and returned on November 5th. Its mission during these three months was to lay mines off the U.S. coast, and it was then sent to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. While there, "U-69 was able to creep up the St. Lawrence River within 300 kms of **Quebec City**. There, off Metis Beach, it sank the **Canadian** freighter **SS Carolus**, taking eleven lives" (Hadley, 1985). As with his other two sinking experiences, Petty Officer Bob Dawson saved himself by jumping off the deck of the sinking **ship**.



Bob Dawson

Extract from Maclean's, The Battle of the St. Lawrence, Jack Mcnaught, November 1, 1949

<https://archive.macleans.ca/issues>

The day U-517 slipped into the river was a sad day for the Allies. In six weeks, it sank 11 ships on Canada's doorstep, took 286 lives

...

No sooner had Paul Hartwig [U-boat (submarine) captain] gone than a fourth U-boat (but it may have been a fifth or sixth or seventh: there is no way of knowing for sure) crept into the Gulf to take his place. On October 9, toward midnight, the new arrival was well upriver when it sighted a convoy steaming along the south shore near the fashionable summer resort of Metis. What happened then, tragic though . it was (the British tramp Carolus was sunk, with a loss of 12 lives), had extraordinary and faintly comic overtones.

At 10 minutes past midnight, in the snug living room of the lighthousekeeper's house on Metis Point, 21-year-old David Gendron was writing a love letter. Everyone else was asleep— his father Octave the lighthousekeeper, David's 12 younger brothers and sisters, his mother, and pretty blond Esther Leblanc who taught school in the village and boarded with the family. Suddenly a dull booming roar sounded out in the river, and the living room windows rattled in their wooden frames. Presently there came a series of other crashes that made the whitepainted house stir on its rock foundation.

At this point, according to one rumor that had spread halfway to Quebec by morning, the lighthousekeeper fled screaming from the house and left his children to their fate. What actually happened was that Octave ran to the lighthouse and up the spiral stair to the platform of the light, 79 feet above the water. Here he studied what could be seen through his old brass telescope, concluded rightly that, a submarine attack was going on, and decided the RCAF station at Mont-Joli should he told about it at once.

To do this he would have to drive the family car, a well-polished black sedan, the three and a half miles from the Point to the nearest phone, which was in Metis village. That being so, he thought it best to take the youngest children along. The slamming hangs of the escort's guns, and the white lights of the star shells they were firing to illuminate the water in case the U-boat should surface, seemed to be closer and closer. As Octave puts it, looking wisely down his nose, the arc of the search was widening. And speaking less technically, he says he was afraid the littlest Gendrons might get hit. (He stoutly denies another rumor then current, that he insisted the enemy was firing at his house.)

Asked how many children he took with him, Octave grins. "I didn't count. I just kept piling them into the car until it wouldn't hold any more, closed the door, and drove for the phone as fast as I could." Mrs. Gendron and the schoolteacher stayed put.

It wasn't very fast (the road is fantastically rough for the most part), but he made pretty good time. He left the children beside the highway, where the road from the point joins it, with instructions to the senior infant present to look after the rest until Papa got back from the village. Then he went on to make his report to Mont Joli. Six minutes after he hung up the receiver, he says, a bomber roared out over the point and headed for what Octave calls the battle.

"After that," he says, "the Government gave me a phone for the house, so I could make my reports faster; which I'd been at them all along to do."

With the sinking of Carolus, followed by Octave's triumph about the phone, there were only two more torpedoings in the submarine campaign in the St. Lawrence. The first of these was in the strait between North Sydney on Cape Breton Island and Port aux Basques, at the southwestern tip of Newfoundland...

At 0420 GMT on 9 October, Gräf's double salvo from 2000 m struck a 4000-ton freighter (KTB) – actually the 2245-ton ex-Finnish vessel SS *Carolus* – some 8.4 miles northeast of Pointe Mitis Light.³⁵ This attack 173 miles from Quebec City was the deepest approach to date. Gräf observed a tall dark blast column followed by almost immediate fire throughout the ship as she broke apart and sank to the river bottom in 2 minutes. The escorts responded with star shell in order to illuminate the scene with the glaring light of day. Watchers on shore witnessed the display from as far away as Pointe aux Outardes on the western tip of Péninsule de Manicougan on the northern shore of the river. Residents on the southern shore could actually hear the explosions of the attack and the ensuing hunt. One of Gräf's "destroyers," the corvette HMCS *Arrowhead*, rescued eighteen of the *Carolus*'s crew, some of whom had been clinging "desperately to empty gas drums, bits of wreckage and life rafts for three-quarters of an hour."³⁶ The sound of distant depth charges followed Gräf's withdrawal to his next patrol station off Cap Chat.

News reports of the attack reached the public within a week. On 15 October 1942, the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services issued his customarily terse statement to the effect that a United Nations' merchant ship had been sunk "by a torpedo from a German U-Boat a few days ago" in the St Lawrence near Métis. He explained little more than that the U-boat had not been seen, and that eighteen merchant sailors had been rescued; twelve were still missing. With typical inventiveness, the press ferreted out further details from watchers on shore and survivors and managed to publish stories that provided the enemy with crucial information on U-boat operations and Canadian defence. These stories doubtless created a stir in senior military circles, for they were in clear contravention of the "Notes on the Publication of News Stories," which the official censor had issued in May 1942 in consequence of the St Lawrence incident. Banner headlines of the Quebec City *Le Soleil* for 15 October, for example, announced "Fréteur torpillé à Métis Beach." Dated Métis Beach, its story revealed the extent of the U-boat advance: "C'est la première fois qu'un sous-marin ennemi est signalé aussi haut dans le Saint-Laurent." This added fuel to Quebec's political fires. The *Ottawa Evening Journal* (15 October 1942) headlined the occurrence "Octave Gendron, lighthousekeeper, and his family [of thirteen children] who live on a point jutting out into the river," amply identified Pointe Mitis Light as the reference point for the attack. In addition, remarks attributed to rescued Montreal naval gunner Alex Dawson to the effect that "nearly thirty depth charges were dropped by the warships" which likely "trapped the sub in these confined waters and then administered the death blow" confirmed two facts: that merchant ships in the St Lawrence carried professional naval gunners (Dawson himself being identified as one of them), and that escorts faced special problems of counter-attack. Read in conjunction with U-69's attack report transmitted to Berlin within twenty hours of the event, gleanings from the garbled "human interest" account would have provided the Germans not only with confirmation of Gräf's success, but with intriguing insights into various aspects of Canadian defence. It would have afforded insights, as well, into the social temper in which the "Battle of the St Lawrence" was being waged. As the navy minister amplified, Canada had to prepare for even greater trials: