SYDNEY HARBOUR'S CONTRIBUTION TO ATLANTIC CANADA'S COASTAL DEFENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

Brian Douglas Tennyson

The strategic importance of Sydney harbour was recognized from the earliest days of European exploration of the region because of its strategic position with respect both to the immensely rich cod fishery and the seaborne entrance to Canada, as well as its proximity to coal seams. Except for the serious drawback of being icebound in winter, Sydney harbour is almost ideally situated for the defence of ocean trade routes and important coastal waters and is in fact better located than Halifax to serve as a base for the defence of Canadian trade, being closer to the important routes which pass through the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Although the French chose to locate their great fortress at Louisbourg, apparently because its harbour was less plagued by ice, Samuel Holland, the Surveyor General of Quebec and the Northern District of North America, argued in 1768 that they had made a serious misjudgment. Following the destruction of its fortress, the once-thriving commercial entrepot of Louisbourg was abandoned by the British and quickly contracted to a very small fishing village. When Cape Breton was constituted as a colony in 1785, the new capital was located at the top of Sydney harbour. That year, when Sydney according to a visiting British officer consisted of "not a dozen Families" in addition to six companies of the 33rd regiment, there was situated at what he called "the Coal Mines, at the entrance of this river," a "Battery on the edge of the rock, above the Road" which he thought was being manned "by Coal-heavers, and Blacksmiths."[1] This signified the recognition of the importance of protecting both the harbour and the coal mines from any possible enemy attack.

An 1848 map of the harbour shows a blockhouse and what is identified as an "old battery," both in ruins, on the shore between Chapel Point and Indian Head. It also shows at Chapel Point the "site of a Battery proposed to be made in a plan by Capt. Molesworth, RE." Yet another old battery in ruins is shown on the shore between Indian Head and Indian Cove.[2]

With Anglo-American relations seriously disturbed, jingoism rampant in the United States as a result of the Civil War, and fear of an American invasion, the War Office acquired the Chapel Point site on 25 June 1862 and on 7 October 1862 authorized the construction of a thirteen-gun (twenty to sixty-four pound muzzle-loading) battery. A surviving line drawing shows that this battery was quite large, with walls around the cliffs, positions for large guns, a

magazine, and a building to house the garrison.[3] The stone work for this battery came from Scotland and the blockhouse was built of brick. There is nothing remaining of this battery today. Apparently all the stone and brick were later carted away and the granite was used in the foundation of a church at Sydney Mines. The guns were also removed. A 1927 report stated that nothing remained on the site except traces of the battery parapet. It also observed that there were burial stones on the site, which it claimed had been destroyed by people using the place as a picnic ground. Finally, the report warned that the property was being rapidly diminished by erosion so that the line of the cliff was then within ten feet of the line of the parapet.[4] This may at least partially explain why there are no visible remains of the 1862 battery today.

Figure 1: Chapel Battery, Sydney, N.S. View of both guns showing twin four-inch barrels.

Source: Department of National Defence.

Prior to 1914 a plan was prepared by the Militia Department for the defence of cable stations, cable landing places and wireless stations at Canso, North Sydney, Glace Bay and Louisbourg. Accordingly, with the outbreak of war imminent, on 31 July 1914 detachments of the Royal Canadian Regiment and two artillery guns on travelling carriages were sent to

Glace Bay, Sydney Mines and Canso.[5] These guns were withdrawn in September 1915, however, and Sydney harbour was apparently left without artillery defence for about a year.'

In February 1917 Germany initiated unrestricted submarine warfare and in April no fewer than 169 British merchant ships totalling 545,282 gross tons were sunk by enemy action.' Consequently, the convoy system was adopted and the first convoy from Canada left Sydney on 10 July 1917. By the spring of 1918, because very large numbers of American troops were being transported to Europe, New York became the major departure port with the Sydney and Halifax convoys joined the larger fleet at sea.[8]

When Sydney was selected *as a* convoy assembly port in June 1917, its defences increased in importance. There was also agitation to have the defences of Sydney harbour improved because of the importance and vulnerability of the steel plant and the coal mines. By the end of the war, therefore, the fixed defences at Sydney consisted of two six-inch guns in concrete emplacements at Low Point and Table Head, and two 4.7" guns each (one on garrison mounting, the other on a specially constructed pedestal) at Cranberry Head and Petrie Point.°

In the summer of 1917 the government created a fleet of coastal patrol ships to deal with the growing submarine threat off the coast and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.[10] The headquarters of these patrols and the main base for most of the vessels was at Sydney because of the availability of coal and the port's proximity to the Gulf. By the end of the war there were nearly two thousand officers and ratings serving in more than one hundred vessels. This improvised organization was never called upon, however, to deal with any sustained or serious attack by German submarines.'

In the summer of 1918 the east coast patrols were supplemented by air patrols based at North Sydney and Halifax. On 5 June 1918 the government authorized the construction of these air bases at an estimated cost of $2,189,600 for the first year. Sydney and Halifax were each assigned six flying boats, three dirigibles and four kite balloons. Because the Canadian government lacked the necessary equipment and the British could not supply it, the U.S. Naval Reserve Flying Corps provided both the men and the equipment. [12] It might be noted that they remained under American control while operating on Canadian soil.

The base at North Sydney was located at Kelley's Beach on the western boundary of the town and was served by a main road, a railway siding, and an electric railway, and facilities were built to accommodate four hundred men. The plan was to provide air escort through the approaches to the port for all convoys, both inward and outward, to reserve one plane for emergency anti-submarine missions, and to do *as* much patrolling as possible.° Practices in spotting for harbour defence guns were also carried out. During the week preceding 13 October 1918, for example, a convoy leaving Sydney was given air protection for a distance of about sixty miles by four planes working in relays.[14]

With the end of the war, the naval and air bases closed and the harbour defence guns were dismantled and removed in 1919. The leases on the land on which the guns at Table Head and Low Point were erected were allowed to lapse and the buildings on leased land were sold. The land on which the Cranberry Head and Petrie Point batteries were erected, which was the property of the Militia Department, was however retained.[15]

Sydney harbour's role in World War II was much greater than it had been in World War I. This was because the Battle of the Atlantic was so critical to the outcome of the war. More than six thousand merchant ships were sunk during the war, taking with them more

than forty thousand merchant seamen. Thousands more sailors in the naval craft escorting them also perished. So too did some twenty-eight thousand German sailors who went down in the 758 U-boats or submarines sunk during the war.'

Canada played a vital role in the Battle of the Atlantic. In the last two years of the war Canada took over responsibility for all north Atlantic convoy operations, and from June 1944 until the end of the war Canadian warships provided the entire close escort for all transatlantic convoys, *as* well as a large proportion of the support groups. James Lamb has concluded that it was in the Battle of the Atlantic that Canada achieved "its finest hour."'

By war's end the Royal Canadian Navy was the third largest navy *in* the world after those of the United States and Great Britain, with a fleet of 378 warships and four hundred auxiliaries,[1]8 and it was the most highly specialized antisubmarine force in the world. Canadian warships had escorted 25,343 merchantmen carrying 180 million tons of cargo safely to their destinations, had destroyed twenty-three U-boats, captured twenty-four, and assisted in the killing of many more. This had been achieved at the cost of 1,981 lives in the twenty-four ships that went down.19

Although this tremendous maritime conflict raged throughout the north Atlantic, nowhere was it fought more bitterly or under more trying conditions than in Canadian waters. It was here that Allied shipping was concentrated and it was from Halifax and Sydney that all Canadian convoys sailed.

The outbreak of war had an immediate and dramatic impact on the communities surrounding Sydney harbour. As early as September 1939 Air Raid Precautions Committees were in place to provide protection against possible attacks, and blackouts were being prac-tised, with warning sirens and bells.[20] Sydney Mines staged the first daytime air raid test in November 1939. All pedestrians and vehicles were required to clear the streets!' Some local people of German and Italian background were detained and "subsequently shipped to a concentration camp in Eastern Canada. "[22] Photographs of the waterfront areas were forbidd-en.[23] That the blackout regulations should be taken seriously was indicated in June 1942 when a Charlotte Street restaurant operator and a private citizen were fined $50 each for violations.24 With the growth of shipping and sinkings, the Sydney harbour communities grew accustomed not only to the large numbers of merchant seamen and RCN sailors but to the landing of survivors from sinkings.

Sydney harbour played an important role in World War II in two ways. First, it served *as a* convoy gathering point for supplies being shipped to the United Kingdom. Second, it developed into a major naval base from which warships sailed to protect convoys and to hunt submarines. Thousands of men passed through the area, serving in the merchant marine and the navy. The industrial area that clustered around Sydney harbour was important, too, because the mines produced so much of the coal that was vital to the war effort, and Sydney produced one-third of the nation's steel. Because of these activities the harbour was ringed with fortifications.

The fast convoys--eight knots or better--sailed from Halifax and the slow convoys from Sydney. It needs to be recalled that German U-boats were operating well within Cana-dian waters. On 5 November 1941 the Naval Services Minister, Angus L. Macdonald, stated publicly for the first time that German submarines were operating within sight of the New-foundland coast.[25] In May 1942 he announced the first enemy naval action in Canadian inland waters with the sinking of a freighter in the St. Lawrence River.[26] In the fall of 1942, the

Germans actually established a permanent weather station just a few miles north of Goose Bay, Labrador, where a major air base was being built. In December 1944 a merchant vessel and a naval ship were torpedoed in the Halifax approaches while a convoy was being formed. And at some point in the war HMCS *Georgian* allegedly sank a U-boat right in the approaches to Sydney harbour.

The fall of 1942 was the worst period of the war in the Gulf. In September the corvette HMCS *Charlottetown was* sunk in the St. Lawrence. In October *U-105* sank a British freighter in broad daylight just twelve miles southeast of St. Paul Island; its crew was rescued and taken into Sydney. Three days later, on 14 October, the *Caribou was* torpedoed by *U-69.* The *Caribou* sailed daily between North Sydney and Port-aux-Basques and was the largest and fastest ship on the Newfoundland ferry service. When it went down, 136 people perished, including thirty-one of the forty-six man crew.

Lamb claims that the sinking of the *Caribou* had a profound impact on the attitude of Canadians towards the naval war. Its nearness to Canadian shores and the horror of the unprovoked and seemingly unnecessary loss of so many lives brought the reality of the war home to people throughout the country.[27] The impact on the communities surrounding Sydney harbour was, needless to say, especially profound.

Because of the seriousness of the submarine threat, all shipping was organized into convoys to ease the burden of naval protection. The first convoy sailed from Sydney on 31 July 1940.28 The first Canadian coastal convoy was inaugurated between St. John's and Sydney on 28 February 1941.[29] From July to November 1942 Sydney was also the assembly point for convoys carrying supplies to American forces in Greenland.[30] The impact of this activity on the Sydney harbour communities was profound because of the large numbers of men coming and going, and the heavy losses being incurred. Convoy SC 94, sailing on 31 July 1942, for example, lost more than one-third of its ships.

The use of Sydney *as a* convoy assembly port immediately increased the tempo of life at the naval base. During August 1940 the harbour contained at one time as many *as* ninety-two ships. In September 1941, 416 ships totalling 1.7 million gross tons entered the harbour, the greatest recorded in any month throughout the war.31

Sydney ceased to be the main convoy assembly port for slow convoys in the summer of 1942. Slow convoys were moved first to Halifax, then to New York, and then back to Halifax, but they did not return to Sydney. By that time the full effect of American participation in the war was beginning to be felt. In September 1942 New York became the point of departure for both fast and slow convoys. Subsidiary convoys, however, continued to assemble at Halifax and Sydney, joining the main convoys at sea.'

In January 1939 a secret memorandum dealing with naval rearmament recommended that in addition to the naval base at Halifax a subsidiary base should be developed at Sydney.33 Approved in 1940, this base supported the naval group called the Sydney Force, which operated out of Sydney escorting convoys. The Sydney Force comprised approximately twenty-two British and Canadian warships throughout the war, including the corvette *Louisburg.*

In May 1940, the naval staff in Sydney numbered 120 officers, ratings and civilians operating out of the old *Post-Record* newspaper building. By July the complement had grown to 253 and working conditions became very cramped.[34] In October it was decided to establish a base at Point Edward, across the harbour, and plans were drawn up during 1941 for a base with facilities to repair and maintain Allied warships, for handling victualling, naval and

armament stores and fuel, for the operation of harbour defences, for maintenance of communications with ships and other establishments, and for the accommodation and training of personnel. The base was planned to accommodate 476 persons and to cost about $3 million.35

Figure 2: Battery Observation Post, Chapel Battery, Sydney, N.S.

Source: Department of National Defence.

        The submarine offensive which took place in 1942 made Sydney the country's second most important base on the east coast and it was recognized that in a crisis all essential naval operations might have to be carried out from there. Halifax, the navy's main east coast base, was already seriously congested and the restricted area within which it was located did not afford any opportunity to plan new construction in such a way *as* to reduce the danger from air attack. The base could easily have been put out of action by a few well directed bombs and by 1942 the rapid development of the capabilities of aircraft had made such an attack possible.36 Accordingly, Point Edward was further developed, at a total estimated cost, including existing development, of $10.9 million.37 By the summer of 1945 there were 2,327 personnel based in Sydney, compared to 16,887 men at Halifax and 3,041 men at St. John's."

In view of all this naval activity it is hardly surprising that the Canadian government invested large amounts of money in building a network of fortifications surrounding Sydney harbour. Lingan Battery was constructed in 1940 by J.P. Porter and Sons at a cost of approximately $200,000 (including land and services). Petrie Battery was built by E.G.M. Cape and Company in 1939-40 at a cost of $105,000. Stubberts and South Bar Batteries were built in 1942 by M.R. Chappell, a local company, at a cost of $112,000. The Fire Command Post at Kilkenny was built in 1951-2 by M.R. Chappell for $97,000, plus another $10,000 for later work. Chapel Point was built by E.G.M. Cape in 1940 at a cost of $150,000, and Oxford Battery was built in 1943 by E.G.M. Cape at a cost of $1.2 million.39

Anti-submarine nets were installed in July 1940. The work was done under private contract and the nets were supplemented by extensive rock and gravel fills extending toward the shore from either end. The next year anti-torpedo nets were laid directly behind and parallel to the anti-submarine nets in order to give complete protection to the port, which by that time had become an important convoy assembly point.40

These fortifications were intended to protect the mines, the steel plant, the naval ships resting at the Point Edward naval base and, of course, the ships gathering into convoys. Eight fortifications were built, ranging from Glace Bay around the harbour to Alder Point and their guns had a range of up to twenty-one miles. Hundreds of men served in these installations, and the last--Fort Petrie at New Victoria--did not officially close until 1956.

Sydney harbour has played a significant, though generally forgotten, role in the coastal defences of Atlantic Canada for many years. Because of the low priority given to defence expenditures by successive Canadian governments since the Second World War, despite the emphasis placed on developing a powerful submarine force by the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War years, coastal defence facilities were particularly ignored. Thus, the fortifications ringing Sydney harbour were stripped and allowed to deteriorate, to the point where they now are in ruins and constitute a growing danger to anyone trespassing on the sites, sad though somewhat romantic reminders of a more heroic past. Happily, however, a group of local citizens has been formed with a view to preserving and restoring at least one of them, the Chapel Point site in Sydney Mines, in an effort to remind people of Sydney harbour's important contribution to our naval and military history.

Like the Fortress of Louisbourg, these sites speak not only of Cape Breton's local history but of its strategic role in guarding the Gulf entrance to Canada and particularly its essential contribution to the two greatest conflicts in the history of mankind Like Louisbourg, they remind us that great global struggles can and have come very close to home. Unlike Louisbourg, they remind us of a conflict, World War II, that may seem more relevant both because of the issues at stake and because so many who participated in it are still with us.

NOTES

• Brian Douglas Tennyson is Professor of History and Director of the Centre for International Studies at the University College of Cape Breton in Sydney, Nova Scotia. His most recent publication is *Canada and the Caribbean Aspects of a Relationship* (1991).

1. C. Bruce Fergusson (ed.), *Uniacke's Sketches of Cape Breton and Other Papers* (Halifax, 1958),

reprinted in Brian Douglas Tennyson (ed.), *Impressions of Cape Breton* (Sydney, 1986), 56.

2. Public Archives of Nova Scotia (hereafter PANS), Map Collection, REO S.4, Edward Walker, "Sketch of the Harbour of Sydney," 30 November 1848.

3. PANS, Map Collection, REO S.5, "Chapel Point" line drawing, 27 May 1863.

4. Department of National Defence (hereafter DND), 345.009 (D4), "Report on Chapel Point, Sydney, NS," 12 May 1927.

5. Cape Breton *Post,* 31 July 1914.

6. DND, 420.009 (D3), General Staff, "Memorandum on The Defences of Sydney, NS," 21 October 1936, 1.

7. Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada (Ottawa,* 1952), 1, 226.

8. *Ibid.,* 227.

9. *Ibid.,* 2-3.

10. *Ibid.,* 252.

11. *Ibid.,* 253.

12. *Ibid.,* 258.

13. *Ibid.,* 256.

14. *Ibid.,* 257.

15. General Staff "Memorandum," 3.

16. James Lamb, *On the Triangle Run* (Toronto, 1986), 3.

17. *Ibid.,* 4.

18. *Ibid.,* 225.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Sydney *Post-Record,* 11/12 September 1939.

21. *Ibid.,* 1 November 1939.

22. *Ibid.,* 20 September 1939.

23. *Ibid.,* 7 July 1941.

24. *Ibid.,* 12 June 1942.

25. *Ibid.,* 6 November 1941.

26. *Ibid.,* 13 May 1942.

27. Lamb, *On the Triangle Run,* 134-135.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Tucker, *Naval Service,* 150.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.,* 120.

33. *Ibid.,* 369.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.,* 170.

36. *Ibid.,* 171.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.,* 531.

39. DND, 375.007 (D85), J.C. Stewart (DOC Military District No. 6) to Secretary, Department of National Defence, Ottawa, 21 January 1946.

40. Tucker, *Naval Service. At* the same time, because Sydney is normally ice-bound from December to late April and essential shipping in winter was redirected to Louisbourg, it was decided in the winter of 1942-43 to provide the port with certain defences to give protection to both merchant ships and their naval escorts. In January 1943 two mobile eighteen-pound guns and two searchlights were provided and manned by the army. The navy provided a double-line anti-torpedo net with a single-line gate. This net was retained in position year round to ensure a defended port alternative to Sydney in case the latter was mined, as Halifax was in June 1943. *Ibid.,* 164.