

The attached Addendum is an extract from the book

S.S. Nerissa, the Final Crossing

*The Amazing True Story of the Loss of a
Canadian Troopship in the North Atlantic*

By

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This Addendum, "The Atlantic Northwesterlies" is not meant to be a stand-alone document. The book provides the historical context and details of the sinking and the tragic loss of life.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated
to those who perished upon the sea,
and
to those who survived and left a legacy
of their stories.

S.S. Nerissa
31 March 1926 – 30 April 1941

*I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have cross'd the bar.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

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*Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,
For I would ride with you upon the wind,
Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,
And dance upon the mountains like a flame.*

William Butler Yeats, Ireland

The Atlantic Northwesterlies An Introduction

During the five and a half years of *the Battle of the Atlantic* (1939-1945) and after northwesterly gales, lifeboats, cargo and other valuable flotsam would often wash ashore upon the rugged coast of Ireland. Over prior centuries, coastal dwellers had always monitored the winds and watched the coast for rescue or salvage opportunities. These northwesterly winds also often resulted in human remains being washed ashore. At least 350 dead were washed up onto the coast of Ireland during the Second World War.

The Republic of Ireland was a neutral party during the Second World War. The Irish authorities (mainly the national police service “the Gardaí”) inspected the remains in situ where found. The Gardaí recorded details such as sex, estimated age, height, state of decomposition and condition of the body, physical attributes of note, any unique dental features, clothing attire, any naval or military insignia, estimated time that the body had been in the ocean and any identifying material found on the body. The Gardaí did attempt to identify the bodies which washed ashore. However, because of war-time secrecy, they usually had no knowledge of any of the ships which were sunk off their coast nor any details related to any persons who were killed in these belligerent actions. Identification of any remains was normally based solely on any evidence which washed ashore with the body. Such evidence might include a combination of: clothing labels and military insignia; letters; diaries; and engraved items such as watches, rings, and pens. The great majority of the remains were not identified.

The matter would then be referred to the regional Coroners for post-mortems. However, because of the numbers of bodies washing ashore and that the deaths appeared to be caused by belligerent actions at sea, no post-mortems or inquests were performed after late 1940. Remains of both the identified and the unknowns were normally buried in church cemeteries nearest to where the body washed ashore.

On 30 April 1941, the Canadian troopship S.S. Nerissa was sunk by a German submarine about 80 nautical miles off the coast of Ireland. However, only eight bodies, which had washed ashore onto the Irish coast after the sinking, were identified by authorities during the war. (Three bodies

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which washed ashore in Scotland and one body which washed ashore in Northern Ireland, were also identified during the war.)

Remains Identified During the War			Days Adrift
23 May	Ireland	MITCHELL, Thomas Elvin, Lieutenant, Carleton and York Regiment	23
26 May	Ireland	HARRISON, Francis Gordon, Corporal, Corps of Military Staff Clerks	26
27 May	Ireland	MORROW, George Dixon, Captain, 2nd Canadian AA Regiment	27
4 Jul	Ireland	WEIR, Archibald Graham, Wing Commander, Royal Air Force	65
5 Jul	Ireland	ROBBINS, Edward Gorton, Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Canadian Navy	66
6 Jul	Ireland	BELL, Duncan, Corporal, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps	67
8 Jul	Ireland	SMITH, Robert Glenn, US Pilot, Auxiliary Air Transport	69
mid Jul	N. Ireland	TOWNSHEND, John Robert, Captain, Royal Canadian Artillery	70
20 Jul	Ireland	WINSPEAR, Ernest, Steward, Merchant Navy, S.S. Nerissa	80
early Aug	Scotland	CLARKE, Victor, Staff Sergeant, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps	95
8 Aug	Scotland	TREE, John Victor, Flight Lieutenant, Royal Air Force	100
15 Aug	Scotland	COLLINGS, Kenneth Brown, US Pilot, Auxiliary Air Transport	112

After the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission provided engraved markers for the nine identified Commonwealth armed forces and merchant navy casualties. The bodies of the two American pilots who had volunteered to serve in the United Kingdom’s Auxiliary Air Transport were exhumed after the war and were repatriated home to the United States of America. In May 2023, the author and a colleague (a former naval officer) paid their respects at the Nerissa graves which are located in Ireland.

Historical Analysis – Eight Decades Later

Anthony Hickey, a retired Irish journalist has been conducting research related to the impact of *the Battle of the Atlantic* on the people and communities located on the west coast of Ireland. He had read my book “*S.S. Nerissa, the Final Crossing*” ... and we are now collaborating in the analysis of various historical records which may now allow identification of bodies from the Nerissa which had not been identified during the war.

In our analysis we were able to consider the wartime context when the

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bodies washed ashore, which 80 years earlier, the Gardia did not know because of wartime secrecy. The most useful contextual details being (1) the casualty list from the *Nerissa*, and (2) casualty lists from other ships which were sunk during the same timeframe and in the same general area of the North Atlantic.

The S.S. *Nerissa* was torpedoed and sunk on 30 April 1941 during the ship's 13th wartime crossing of the North Atlantic. The ship was sunk about 80 nautical miles off the coast of Ireland, with a loss of 207 lives (81 merchant navy, 10 Royal Canadian Navy, 73 Canadian Army, 4 Royal Navy, 8 Royal Air Force, 11 Air Transport Auxiliary – American pilots, 3 Royal Norwegian Air Force and 17 civilian passengers). The majority of the *Nerissa* casualties were adult males. However, the merchant navy casualties included two adult females, and the civilian passenger casualties included two adult females and three young siblings (male age 6, female age 4 and female age 3).

During the two months preceding and the one month following her sinking (i.e. March, April and May 1941 timeframe), only three other merchant ships and one Royal Navy ship were sunk within 300 nautical miles of the Irish coast with a total of 117 casualties (66 merchant navy, 50 Royal Navy and one British Army) of whom all are believed to be adult males. There were: no passengers; no female crew members; and no families with children:

- 2 March - *Augvald* – Norwegian steam merchant, 265 nm, 29 dead, sunk by U-147;
- 10 March - *Reykjaborg* – Icelandic steam trawler, 240 nm, 13 dead, sunk by U-552;
- 19 May - *SS Empire Ridge* – 50 nm, 27 dead, including the Master, William Ernest Clark (age 57) and 3 gunners (2 RN and 1 British Army), sunk by U-96; and
- 28 May – *HMS Mashona* – Tribal class destroyer, 49 nm, 48 RN dead, sunk by Luftwaffe aircraft. Bodies started to come ashore a month later in County Mayo on 27 June. One being Peter Clifford McGlade (age 17), a Boy 1st Class, Royal Navy.

The probabilities alone suggests that many of the bodies which washed ashore in May through July 1941 were likely from the *Nerissa*. However during the war, only eight of the many remains which washed ashore onto the Irish coast from the *Nerissa*, could be identified.

Our analysis would also leverage the known dates and coastal locations where identified *Nerissa* casualties were found on the coast of both Ireland and Northern Ireland. This information provides approximate dates and coastal areas where additional bodies from the *Nerissa* debris field might have also been blown ashore by one of the occasional northwesterly gales.

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The bodies of the Nerissa casualties had become elements in a complex and expanding floating debris field. One might expect that actions of nature such as the winds, waves, currents, tides, and storms over a couple months would break up such debris fields and randomly disperse the elements. However, those elements in a floating debris field which have similar physical characteristics such as a combination of buoyancy, weight, size, shape, freeboard (i.e. distance from water level to top of the element), draught (distance from water level to bottom of the element) etc. tend to be acted upon in similar manners by these actions of nature and may cluster together over time in an expanding debris field. (For a modern day analogy, one need only think about the islands of plastic waste in the central Pacific Ocean.)

Bodies from the 30 April sinking of the Nerissa started washing up onto the western coast of Ireland in the third week of May and continued sporadically with the onset of northwesterly winds until about mid-July. When these northwesterly gales did blow, our analysis indicates that in addition to the eight bodies identified during the war, at least another nine unidentified bodies from the Nerissa washed ashore along the rugged coast of Ireland. Their remains were buried under “*Known unto God*” markers or in unmarked graves in various church cemeteries.

The Northwesterlies (late May 1941)

Northwesterly winds were strong a few days before the last week of May 1941, and they were likely the first winds to cause human remains from the Nerissa to be carried ashore onto the western coast of Ireland. The first bodies, which were identified during the war, were those of three Canadian Army personnel.

Remains Found	Days Adrift	Identified During the War
23 May	23	MITCHELL, Thomas Elvin, Lieutenant, Carleton and York Regiment
26 May	26	HARRISON, Francis Gordon, Corporal, Corps of Military Staff Clerks
27 May	27	MORROW, George Dixon, Captain, 2nd Canadian AA Regiment

Based upon analysis of available historical records, an additional five bodies which washed ashore in late May 1941 are now believed to be from the ill-fated Nerissa: the Australian wife of an army officer; a Canadian naval officer; a young Canadian sailor; and two children of the Lomas family.

Lifeboat No. 7

On 14 August 1941 a letter was sent by the Irish Department of External Affairs to the Acting High Commissioner for Canada, in Dublin.

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“On the 24th May last a lifeboat which bore no identification markings and which contained a Canadian soldier’s tunic and some blankets was washed at Bofin Island, Co. Galway.

A list of articles found in a pocket of the tunic is enclosed. The identity card found in the pocket book would appear to indicate that the owner of the tunic was D56323 Private Nadeau, J., presumably of the Canadian Forces.

We can hand over the articles ...

The tunic and personal items belonged to Private J.I. Nadeau of the *Le Régiment de Maisonneuve* (a Montreal regiment). He was on the upper deck of the S.S. Nerissa when the first torpedo struck. Luckily, he had his lifebelt with him and he was wearing a greatcoat over his tunic. Nadeau immediately went to his assigned Lifeboat Station No. 7 on the aft starboard side. The No. 7 boat was launched and manned by Nerissa’s six Royal Artillery DEMS gunners. The ropes had to be cut, however No. 7 was the only lifeboat which was launched successfully.

The men in boat No. 7 rowed all night to stay warm and alive. They stayed within the floating debris field of wreckage and bodies, some wearing lifejackets with little fairy-like flickering lights. Other survivors were baling their flooded boats or clinging to rafts or capsized boats. About ten hours after the sinking and about 32 nautical miles north of the location of the sinking, 84 survivors (including Private Nadeau) remained alive to be rescued by HMS Veteran. Lifeboat No. 7, with Nadeau’s tunic, was left in the expanding debris field. On or about 24 May 1941, Nerissa Lifeboat No.7 washed ashore onto Bofin Island (*Inisbofin*) after some northwesterly winds.

The Army Major’s Wife

The Saturday 31 May 1941 edition of the weekly *Western People* newspaper in County Mayo reported under “*BODIES WASHED ASHORE*”.

“On Saturday last [24 May] the body of a woman was washed ashore at Grangehill, about twelve miles from Belmullet. Although the face was decomposed the body was in good condition. There was a tuft of grey hair on her head, indicating that the woman was old. There was nothing to identify the body ... Two other bodies were seen with the aid of glasses far out to sea.

The Belmullet police report by Garda Superintendent “W. Burns”, dated “19/5/41” and entitled “*Re: Dead Body of an Unknown Woman washed ashore at Granghill, Barnatra, Ballina, Co. Mayo, on 23rd May 1941*” provided an official summary for Garda headquarters in Dublin:

“... the deceased was 5ft. 4inc. in height, about 9 ½ st. [133 pounds] and had brown hair turning grey. She was about 45 years of age, but owing to disfiguration it is difficult to give age with any degree of accuracy.

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The body appeared to be in the sea for about 3 weeks and the face, scalp, shoulders and arms were badly damaged as the result of coming in contact with the rocks.

The ring found on the body is a plain one, and material is either silver or platinum. The following markings are on the inside of the ring:- W.M – Crown – 18 – Anchor – (H)

A second police report by “W. Burns, dated “19/6/41” with the same title provides further details to headquarters:

“... an unknown woman, aged between 35 and 45 years ...

... the only articles of clothing on the body was a pink bodice (Twilfit make) and a pair of brown stockings. There was a ring on the woman’s finger, same was removed and retained by the Gardai. The body was not badly decomposed and did not appear to have been long in the water. A lifebelt was found near the body.

The matter was reported to the Coroner – Dr. McNulty, Killala – but as it appeared that the death had been caused by belligerent operations at sea no inquest was held.

The remains were buried in Termoncara graveyard by the Relieving Officer – Mr Martin Gallagher – on the 24th May, 1941, and the grave is marked and can be identified if necessary.

The remains of the adult female, which washed ashore at Granghill, Barnatra, Ballina, Co. Mayo, on or about 23 May 1941, are now believed to be the body of Joy Stuart-French (age 35). Her husband was Robert Stuart-French (Major, 11th Hussars – former aide-de-camp to 14th Governor-General of Canada), who survived the sinking. Joy was the older of the two adult female passengers. The supporting evidence includes:

- The body was recovered on 23 May and “*appeared to be in the sea for about 3 weeks*”. Of the ships which had been sunk off the coast of Ireland in April and May, the Nerissa was the only ship which had female casualties.
- The female “*had brown hair turning grey*”. The estimated age of the body varied from being “*old*” when discovered on the shore, and then “*about 45 years of age*” in the initial police report, and finally to “*between 35 and 45 years*” after the initial report was reviewed by the superintendent. There were four adult female casualties: Florence Jones, age 50 (Nerissa stewardess); Joy Stuart-French, age 35 (Passenger); Hilda Lynch, age 34 (Nerissa Stewardess); and Elizabeth Lomas, age 26 (Passenger).
- The jeweler’s mark “*W.M – Crown – 18 – Anchor – (H)*” tells us: **W.M.** is the manufacturer; **Crown 18** – the metal is Gold 18-carat (75% gold); **Anchor** – it was manufactured in Birmingham; and **(H)** in 1932. The

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ring was a wedding band. It is unfortunate that the police reports do not indicate on which hand and finger the gold ring was found. When the Nerissa was sunk, there were only two married women embarked. Joy Stuart-French and Elizabeth Lomas would have been wearing the ring on the traditional ring finger on the left hand.

The body, believed to be that of Joy Stuart-French, an Australian, was interred in an unmarked grave in the Termoncarragh Cemetery, which is located at the top of a beautiful hill in a remote area of the Belmullet peninsula in County Mayo. Our research indicates that her unmarked grave is among a number of Commonwealth War Graves Commission graves in the cemetery. To provide an appropriate memorial gravestone would require involvement by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Irish authorities and perhaps Australian authorities. Such actions can only succeed if relatives of Joy and Robert Stuart-French, merchant navy associations and their governments are made aware of this need to remember and honour one of the women lost during the sinking of the S.S. Nerissa.

The Canadian Naval Officer

The Saturday 31 May 41 edition of *The Western People* weekly newspaper reported “*BODIES WASHED ASHORE – One in Naval Uniform at Ballycastle*”.

“On Monday the body of a man dressed in naval uniform was washed ashore at Ballycastle. The uniform had gold braided sleeves, and he wore yellow boots. On one of his left fingers was a gold ring bearing the initials “B.G.H.” A pocket book containing two 2-dollar bills payable to the Bank of Canada and a United States 1-dollar bill He wore a nickel-plated wristlet watch which had stopped at 3:15. ... Some Catholic religious medals were also found in his pocket. The body, which was apparently about three weeks in the water, was given a Catholic burial in Doonfeeney Cemetery.

The initial police report provides a summary.

On the 25th May, 1941, the body of a man was found washed ashore at Doonfeeney, Upper Ballycastle, Co. Mayo. The body which appeared to have been about three or four weeks in the water, was dressed in blue trousers, blue uniform jacket with brass buttons embossed with a crown and anchor, and brown shoes [no mention of the yellow seaboots which had been worn over the shoes]. There was a stripe of gold braid around both sleeves of the jacket.

A wallet ... contained a Bank of Canada Two Dollar Bill No. DB /9380045 issued at Ottawa on the 2nd January, 1937 and a United States One Dollar Bill No. J.57150101B. ... Some religious medals were also found in the wallet. A chromium nickel cased wristwatch on

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the deceased's left wrist bore the number 15/ 80238 and had stopped at 3:15. On the left hand was a gold ring with the letters B.G.H. engraved thereon.

The body was interred in the new graveyard at Ballycastle, the number of the grave being 13. (Father Maguire likely indicated that the grave number would be 13. However, when the "unknown" was later interred, the grave was recorded being 14 in the then-current page of the cemetery registry).

The remains of the adult male which washed ashore at Doonfeeny, Upper Ballycastle, Co. Mayo on or about 25 May 1941 are now believed to be the body of Sub Lieutenant Barnett Harvey, age 20, Royal Canadian Navy. The supporting evidence includes:

- The body was wearing a Sub Lieutenant's naval uniform with "brass buttons embossed with a crown and anchor" on the front and a stripe of gold braid around both sleeves of the jacket. (Such buttons on Merchant Navy uniforms were not embossed with a crown and anchor.)
- The RN and the RCN wore the same uniform. The RCN uniform did not yet include CANADA badges. The body was found on 25 May. The HMS Mashona, which may have had Sub Lieutenant ranked casualties, was sunk on 28 May, three days after the body of a naval Sub Lieutenant washed ashore in county Mayo.
- The body was wearing yellow boots. There were three RCN Sub Lieutenants embarked in the Nerissa. They were passengers, however during the transit Sub Lieutenants Edward Robbins, Barnett Harvey and Harold Ledsham served as Second Officers of the Watch and lookouts on the conning bridge which was open to the weather. They would have been provided yellow sea boots to be worn over their leather shoes. Sub Lieutenant Robbins' body would later wash ashore in July and Sub Lieutenant Ledsham would survive the sinking.
- The wrist watch stopped at 3:15 (0315 GMT 1 May) which was almost 5 hours after the 2234 GMT 30 April sinking of the Nerissa. This timing suggests that the person wearing the watch may have survived the initial sinking. However, when the second torpedo struck, the explosion caused all persons (including Harvey) in lifeboat No. 2 to be thrown into the sea. The brand or condition of the watch, which was found on the body, was not recorded in the police report. A naval officer would have selected a waterproof brand, however after 5 hours in the ocean, there would likely be ingress.
- On the body's left hand was a gold signet ring with the engraved letters "B.G.H.". Sub Lieutenant Harvey's official records shows that he, his

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father and his grandfather were each named Barnett Harvey, with no middle name. Sub Lieutenant Harvey's grandfather, Major Barnett Harvey (1867-1933) was born in Alloa, Scotland and he served in the Canadian Army during World War One. Genealogical research, shows that Margaret Gourlay (1803-1881) married John Harvey (1787-1847) who was the great-grand uncle of Sub Lieutenant Harvey's grandfather. The records also show that their son was William G. Harvey (1840-1917) and their great-grandson was William G. Harvey (1904-1992). Both their son and their great-grandson had the middle initial G, but no middle name recorded. It is now believed that the G (for Gourlay) was included in the Harvey family signet ring in recognition of a beloved matriarch of this Scottish family. -- The ring, a family heirloom, was likely passed down from his grandfather through his father to Sub Lieutenant Barnett Harvey.

(A personal aside, if I may. On my left hand is a gold signet ring with engraved letters "W.C.D." which was passed on to me from my late father William Carter Dziadyk, RCN. My initials are "W.G.D." but I wear his ring.)

- Catholic religious medals were found on the body. Sub Lieutenant Harvey's personnel records document that his religious denomination was "Church of England" (aka Anglican). However, it is also known that such religious medals were sometimes carried by parishioners of the Church of England. Harvey's religious medals "*were taken possession of by Rev. Fr. Maquire, C.C. Ballycastle. ... Owing to the finding of the Religious Medals on the body ... Rev. Fr. Maquire officiated at the burial ...*".

A hand-written undated entry in the chronological Registry of Internments in Ballycastle Cemetery records the burial of an "*Unknown body washed ashore, male, RC*". The date was not initially included in this log entry. However, in this chronological listing, the two preceding log entries were dated "*Kate Healy ... 30-10-40*" and "*John McDonnell ... 2-2-41*" (2 Feb 1941), and the following entry was dated 30 May 1941 "*Joseph Crossland ... 30-5-41*".

The Registry entry was later updated in red ink to include where and when the body washed ashore at "*Doonfeeney 25-5-41*". A footnote written in the same red ink was also added at the bottom of the page "*(Possibly a Canadian Merchant Navy Officer Golden zick zack braiding on cuff like radio officer)*". However, it must be noted that the Garda police report clearly documents that "*There was a stripe of gold braid around both sleeves of the jacket.*" Such a single "*stripe of gold braid*" was (and still is) a regular force Royal Canadian Navy Sub Lieutenant's rank insignia.

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Ballycastle was a relatively new cemetery in 1941 and burial plots were sequenced in chronological order:

- Plot #812 **Kate Healy** with headstone,
- Plot #813 **John McDonnell** (no headstone),
- Plot #814 **Sub Lieutenant Barnett Harvey** (no headstone),
- Plot is not numbered and may be left unused, and
- Plot #815 **Joseph Crossland** with headstone.

The first digit of these plot numbers indicate the specific page in the Registry of Internments, where the details of up to 15 internments would be recorded. The following two digits indicate the line number on that page.

The location of the grave has been viewed. It is not marked but it is identifiable as being plot number 814 based on the sequence of names in the ***Registry of Internments in Ballycastle Cemetery***

In May 2023, Anthony Hickey accompanied the author and my colleague David Lepine (a former naval officer and now the Mayor of Ogden, Quebec) to Barnett Harvey's unmarked gravesite. We also inspected the Registry of Internments which confirms the location of Harvey's grave.



Recent attempts have been made to contact members of Barnett Harvey's family. At the time of his death, his father (also named Barnett Harvey) and his mother Agnes Edith "Bobbie" Harvey lived in the town of Courtenay on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. His sister Betty Pamela Harvey, then 22 years old, was serving as a Second Lieutenant in the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) in Ottawa. Their parents have long since passed and Pamela died at the age of 76 on 28 March 1995. Sub Lieutenant Barnett Harvey's only sister never married, nor had any children. Her remains were interred with those of their mother in plot number B-1003a in the Courtenay Civic Cemetery.

In July 2023, the author presented a signed copy of this book to the library at Barnett Harvey's alma mater, the Brentwood College prep school which is now located in Mill Bay, British Columbia.

Providing an appropriate memorial gravestone or even repatriation home to Canada would require involvement by the Commonwealth War Graves



Commission and Irish authorities. Such actions can only succeed if Canadians, relatives of Sub-Lieutenant Barnett Harvey, veterans associations, his alma mater, and the Canadian government are made aware of this need to remember and honour a young Canadian naval officer who was killed in action.

A Canadian Sailor

A police report dated 29 May 1941 provides some details related to the finding of a body at about 9:00 AM on 27 May 1941. That body had washed ashore on the strand at Doughmore, Doonbeg, County Clare.

“The body was then lying on the sand some 50 yards below high water mark, the tide having ebbed. ... an examination of the body disclosed that it was that of a man of about 6 feet in height, approximately 14 stone weight [196 pounds], stout build, strong muscular body, short neck and good teeth. The body was in advanced state of decomposition, the greater part of the face being missing as well as the eyes and hair. Leaving the features devoid of recognition. No deformities of the body were noticeable nor were there any tattoos or other marks. ... The following is a description of the garments:-

TROUSERS:- navy blue of rough serge; elastic waistband which acted as braces; wide-bottom legs similar to those worn by sailors or merchant navy men. On a tab inside the waistband at the back was printed the words “The St. James Tailors” and underneath ... was written in block letters the name “J.Hutton”.

PULLOVER: Navy blue, of knitted wool, fitted with sleeves, not tab or mark of any kind.

SOCKS: Navy blue of knitted wool, red edges around the tops.

LIFE BELT: Rubber inflatable type; metal clip bearing the Trade Mark “Swimmaster”; deflated when found, the screw-cap being missing from the inflation tube.

... The Doctor examined the body on the evening of the 27/5/41 and gave it as his opinion that death by drowning had taken place some two months previously. An inquest was not considered necessary.

On the same date [27 May] the body was interred ... in Clohanes Cemetary [in County Clare] and the grave has been marked with adequate means of identification for any future reference. ...

The Saturday, 7 June 1941, edition of *The Clare Champion* weekly newspaper also reported on a “Tragedy on the Clare Coast”.

“Last week a dead body was washed ashore at Doughmore. It was of a man, who, in life, must have been of fine physique, over six feet high It was however, badly decomposed and had apparently been in the water for a couple of months. The clothing included a sailor’s blue jersey and trousers at the back of which there was a tailor’s tab with the

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name “J. Hutton” in marking ink.

The remains of the adult male which washed ashore at Doughmore, Doonbeg, County Clare on or about 27 May 1941 are now believed to be the body of Ordinary Telegraphist James Hutton, age 21, Royal Canadian Navy. The supporting evidence includes:

- The body was estimated to be about 6 feet in height. James Hutton’s personnel file states that his height was 5 foot 9 ½ inches.
- The weight of the body was estimated to be about 196 pounds. Hutton’s personnel file does not record his 1941 weight. However four years earlier, at age 16, he weighed 160 pounds when he applied to be accepted as a boy seaman. He would have filled out significantly (in weight and muscle) over the subsequent 4 years (including during his recently completed 9 month RCN telegraphist course at the naval base near Victoria, British Columbia).
- The navy blue trousers worn by the deceased included a “*The St. James Tailors*” label. This tailor shop was located at 717 View Street in Victoria, British Columbia. Also located on the same city block was the Canadian Legion which offered social amenities to serving sailors and soldiers. This tailor shop was thus strategically located to provide tailored uniforms to RCN and Canadian Army personnel.

The fact that the owner of the bell-bottom pants, wrote “J. HUTTON” in indelible ink on the label, is very strong evidence that its owner was Ordinary Telegraphist James Hutton. He had probably purchased his “*number ones*” uniform (i.e. tailor-made jumper and pants) just before completing his 9 month Telegraphist course.

There was no evidence found with the body which indicated that the unknown sailor was Catholic. However, his body was interred in an unmarked grave in the Clohanes Catholic Cemetery in County Clare. The *Catholic Funeral Rites* would not have been performed and the church burial register does not include an entry for this burial of an “unknown”.



In May 2023, the author, and colleague David Lepine, paid their respects at the still secluded beach where Hutton’s body washed ashore early on 27 May 1941.

A reporter (Fiona McGarry) and photographer (John Kelly) from *The Clare Champion* newspaper accompanied us, when we later visited the Clohanes Graveyard. A local resident, Senan McCarthy also joined us.

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Senan's father, had been the undertaker in the 1940's and he had likely prepared the unknown sailor's body for burial. Senan showed us two sites where Hutton may have been laid to rest. The first site is located towards the middle of the graveyard and it has an old rusty metal cross serving as a marker.

The second site is nearer to the entrance and off to left, and between the existing grave markers and an overgrown perimeter hedgerow. (Photo by John Kelly) Senan recalled that there was once a rusty metal cross with a circle going through it (a Celtic cross) serving as a marker. This site at the perimeter of the graveyard is now believed to be the location of the grave of Ord Tel James Hutton, an "unknown". A related article "*Appeal for information on Canadian sailor's grave*" was published in the 18 May 2023 edition of the newspaper.



Confirming the location of Hutton's grave and providing an appropriate memorial gravestone or even repatriation home to Canada would require involvement by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Irish authorities. Such actions can only succeed if relatives of Ordinary Telegraphist James Hutton, Canadians, veterans associations and the Canadian government are made aware of this need to remember and honour a young Canadian sailor who was killed in action.

Recent unsuccessful attempts have been made to contact descendants of James Hutton's family who, at the time of his death in 1941, were living in the town of Coalhurst near Lethbridge Alberta. His father Walter Cooke Hutton had died at age 49, nine years earlier in 1932. James' mother Elizabeth (Simpson), then 47, was left to raise three young children: James (age 12), Gladys May (age 11) and John (Jack) Robert (age 9). James being the eldest, took on many family responsibilities. When James joined the Navy, he supported his mother through official pay allotments.

The Lomas Family

Joseph and Elizabeth Lomas and their three young children (6 year old Terence, 4 year old Joan and 3 year old Margaret) were returning home to England. The children had been sleeping when the first torpedo struck at 10:34 PM. The children were quickly dressed and the family rushed to their assigned lifeboat No. 2. The two Nerissa stewardesses, Hilda Lynch (age 34) and Florence Jones (age 50), had given their own lifebelts to the two older children. Sub Lieutenants Harvey and Robbins then helped the parents get

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their three children into the boat. The boat was being lowered when the second torpedo slammed into the Nerissa. The resulting explosion caused all occupants in the lifeboat to be thrown into the sea.

The Saturday 31 May 41 edition of *The Western People* weekly newspaper reported under heading “*HUSBAND, WIFE AND CHILD?*”

“Three other bodies were washed ashore during the week near Rossport Erris. One was the body of a man. At a distance of about five yards the remains of a woman were washed ashore, and further away the body of a child about seven years of age was found. A lifebelt floated beside the body of the child. There was nothing found on any of the bodies that would lead to their identification, but it is presumed that they were those of husband, wife and child.”



The Mother - The remains of the woman found near the child could be Terence’s mother Elizabeth Lomas (age 26). However the remains could also be those of Stewardess Hilda Lynch (age 34).

The Father - The great majority of the 207 Nerissa casualties were adult males, so it is a remote possibility that the remains of the man are those of 31 year old Joseph Edgar Lomas.

The Son - The remains of the child about seven are believed to be the body of six year old Terence Lomas.

The related police reports have not yet been located in the Irish archives. These official reports would likely provide additional clues as to the identity of the woman and the man ... and the locations of where the three bodies were buried.

The Older Daughter - A 28 May 1941 police report “*Dead body of Unknown Female – washed ashore at Dooyork, Geesala, C. Mayo on 24th May 1941*” provided details of the finding of the body of a young girl.

“... the dead body of an unknown female, aged between 9 and 12, was washed ashore ... A search of the clothing on the deceased failed to find any document, etc. that would assist in establishing her identity.”

The deceased was dressed in a one-piece blue and red woolen suit with zip fastener and buttoned below the knee, bright coloured stockings and a white woolen singlet. The girl appeared to be of a stout build with fair hair and good teeth. The body was not badly decomposed and did not appear to have been long in the sea. A lifebelt

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was found near the body and from markings thereon it appeared to have been manufactured in Brooklyn N.Y. and of adult size. The name "R.J. Sullivan, No. 971375" was marked on it, also what appeared to be the name "R.M. Martin" but the latter name, owing to obliteration was not definitely established.

The matter was reported to the Coroner –Doctor McNulty, Killala – but as it appeared to the death had been caused by belligerent operation at sea no inquest was held.

The remains were buried in Geesala graveyard by the Relieving Officer – Thomas McAndrew – on 24th May, 1941. The grave is marked and can be identified if necessary.

The 28 May police report was forwarded to headquarters on 5 June 1941 with a note stating that the markings on the grave are "*No.2 – Unknown Female 10 years, washed ashore at Dooyork, 24.5.41*"

The remains of the young girl which washed ashore at Dooyork, Geesala, County Mayo on or about 24 May 1941 are now believed to be the body of four year old Joan Lomas. The supporting evidence includes:

- The body of the young female which was recovered on 24 May "*did not appear to have been long in the sea*". Of the ships which had been sunk off the coast of Ireland in April and May, only the Nerissa had young female casualties which were Joan Lomas and her younger sister Margaret.
- The girl's body was wearing "*a one-piece blue and red woolen suit with zip fastener and buttoned below the knee, ... and a white woolen singlet*". About 5 minutes before the explosion caused all occupants of their lifeboat to be thrown into the sea, Joan had been sound asleep in the family's cabin. There was no time for her parents to change her out of her one piece sleeper, but there was time enough to perhaps put on one of her father's woolen singlets.
- The police report does not include the height and only states that the "*unknown female, aged between 9 and 12*" had "*good teeth*". Joan was born in December 1936, so she was 4 years and 4 months old at the time of her death. She would still have a full set of her primary (or deciduous) teeth. Normally it is at the ages 9 to 12 when most children have finished the process of losing their primary teeth and getting their adult set. It seems that a correlation between condition of teeth and the age of the child was made by the Garda. If an inquest had been held, a more accurate estimation of age would have been determined based on height, weight and a closer inspection of the teeth.
- The report states that "*the girl appeared to be of a stout build*". There are subjective opinions as to what a "*stout build*" actually means. The

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member of the Garda probably meant “*not slim*”. The above family photograph was taken about 12 or 18 months earlier when she would have been about three or three and half years old. In this picture, Joan is not slim and she is almost as tall as her older brother Terence.

- The “*lifebelt ... found near the body*” was an “*adult size*”. It may just be a strange coincidence. However, when the family was thrown into the sea from lifeboat No. 2, Terence and Joan were wearing the adult size lifebelts of the stewardesses, Hilda Lynch and Florence Jones.

In June 2023, my colleague Anthony Hickey and County Mayo volunteers funded and placed a proper grave marker (which also memorializes her family) on four-year old Joan Lomas’ grave:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
JOAN LOMAS
CHARLTON, LONDON
DIED APRIL 30TH 1941 AGED 4
SINKING SS NERISSA
ALONG WITH
HER MOTHER ELIZABETH AGED 26
HER BROTHER TERENCE AGED 8
INTERRED IN KILGALLIGAN
HER FATHER JOSEPH AGED 31
AND HER SISTER MARGARET AGED 3
LOST AT SEA

And finally at the bottom of little Joan Lomas’ grave marker, is an inscription in Irish Gaelic, which is translated below:

CHRIST OF THE SEA, CHRIST OF THE FISHES,
IN THE NETS OF GOD, MAY YOU BE FOUND.

The Northwesterlies (Late June - Early July 1941)

Five bodies were found washed ashore 59 to 69 days after the sinking of the Nerissa. They were likely carried ashore as a result of Northwesterly winds which were strong during the last few days of June and early July 1941. Four of the bodies were identified during the war.

Remains Found	Days Adrift	Identified During the War
4 Jul	65	WEIR, Archibald Graham, Wing Commander, Royal Air Force
5 Jul	66	ROBBINS, Edward Gorton, Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Canadian Navy
6 Jul	67	BELL, Duncan, Corporal, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps
8 Jul	69	SMITH, Robert Glenn, US Pilot, Auxiliary Air Transport

The Master

The body of a fifth person, wearing a Merchant Navy tunic with Master's gold braid on its sleeves, was also washed ashore by the northwesterly winds. A police report dated 1 July 1941 "*Dead Body washed ashore at Ashleam, Achill Sound, Co. Mayo, on the 28-6-41.*" provides some details.

"... on 28-6-41. At 11.45 a.m. Thomas Duggan ... reported at Achill Sound Garda Station that a body of a man washed ashore at Ashleam, ... [police] searched the body and found nothing on it by which it could be identified. The only article found on the body was a sailor's knife.

The body was dressed in a sailor's uniform and there were four gold bands on the cuffs of both sleeves. The outer two were plain bands, and the two centre bands were knotted.

The body was very much decomposed and had the appearance of being in the water for a considerable time. It was interred in the Protestant Cemetery at Ashill Sound on the 28-6-41, ... The grave is not marked as the Relieving Officer states he will not undertake the expense until he will get a authority ... to undertake the expense of erecting a mark over it.

The Relieving Officer and the Minister Rev. Mr. Abbernethy, Achill Sound will ... identify the grave at any time.

A handwritten note in the margin was later added "Grave marked with white timber X [cross] with inscription "Body of unknown man washed ashore at Ashleam, Achill Sound on the 28th June 1941"

The remains of the sailor which washed ashore at Ashleam, Achill Sound on or about 28 June 1941 are now believed to be the body of the 58 year-old Master of the S.S. Nerissa, Gilbert Ratcliffe Watson. The supporting evidence includes that the found body was wearing the uniform of a Merchant Navy ship's Master with four gold braid bands with the two centre bands knotted. Watson was wearing this uniform when he fired three flares and yelled 'Good luck boys' as he went down with his ship.



The S.S. Empire Ridge had been sunk about 50 nautical miles west of Ireland on 19 May 1941, and one of the casualties was the Master (Ernest William Clark, age 57). However, it is very unlikely that the remains which washed ashore on 28 June would be those of Clark. The rationale includes that it would be a much shorter distance for a debris field from the Empire Ridge to have reached the Irish coast. Bodies from the Empire Ridge would not have been "*very much decomposed*" as they would not have been in the sea as long as those from the S.S. Nerissa, which had been sunk 19 days

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earlier and about 80 nautical miles northwest of the Irish coast.

After the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Irish authorities replaced the timber cross with an engraved tombstone. The inscription reads “A SAILOR / OF THE / 1939 – 1945 / WAR / A MASTER / MERCHANT NAVY / FOUND 28TH JUNE 1941 / KNOWN UNTO GOD”

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Irish authorities will be approached to provide a replacement marker which adequately memorizes Gilbert Ratcliffe Watson, the Master of the troopship S.S. Nerissa.

The Northwesterlies (Mid-July 1941)

After another Northwesterly, three more bodies, from the Nerissa, are known to have washed onto the Irish western coast in the middle of July 1941. Two of the bodies were identified during the war.

Remains Found	Days Adrift	Identified During the War
mid Jul	75	TOWNSHEND, John Robert, Captain, Royal Canadian Artillery
20 Jul	80	WINSPEAR, Ernest, Steward, S.S. Nerissa

One of the three RAF Flight Sergeants

The body of a third person also washed ashore. A police report dated 22 July 1941 “*Re Body of Airman washed ashore at Malin Head, Co. Donegal, on 16/7/41.*” provides details related to finding the body of a member of the Royal Air Force.

“... a (male) body in the uniform of the “R.A.F.” was found, being washed ashore, on the incoming tide at Gortnamullin, Malin Head, 11:30 p.m. on the 16/7/41 ...

When removed from the tide the body was found to be very much decomposed and the appearance of been in the sea for from four to six weeks. The right foot, right forearm and hand were missing. The left forearm and hand broke off ... at the elbow as the body was being moved ashore. [The report provide further gruesome details which are not be repeated herein.]

The body was clad in tunic and trousers of Royal Air Force uniform. ... Each sleeve of the tunic was a Sergeant’s chevrons, above the chevrons on each sleeve was broach in the form of a regal Crown while above each broach and Airman’s wings in cloth was sewn on.

Despite the fact that a thorough search and enquiries were made nothing was found which would assist in establishing the identity of the body. The coroner was notified ... He decided that an inquest was unnecessary.

The body was interred at Malin in the Protestant [Church of Ireland]

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Graveyard there on the 18/7/41. At the request of the R.A.F. authorities, Limavady, Co. Londonderry [RAF Limavady, Northern Ireland]... a coffin [was] procured.

In June 2023, the author visited the **Ottawa Memorial** where Commonwealth air forces personnel, who were lost at sea, are memorialized. The three Flight Sergeants from the Nerissa are recorded for 1941. The memorial also records that an RAF Flight Sergeant A. Chapman was lost at sea in 1941. However, Chapman was lost off the coast of Newfoundland, much later on 31 December 1941. It is now believed that body which washed ashore at Gortnamullin, Malin Head, in County Donegal on or about 16 July 1941, can only be the body of one of the three RAF Flight Sergeants who were killed during the sinking of the S.S. Nerissa: 40 year-old George E. Morrison; 27 year-old Graham Pooch; or 24 year-old Edward Charles Reed.

In May 2023, on behave of the author, a colleague (David Jenkins) visited the Church of Ireland cemetery and he found the gravesite. His photos show a weathered and faded inscription on the CWGC marker: “*RAF Badge / AN AIRMAN / OF THE / 1939 – 1945 / WAR / A FLIGHT SERGEANT (PILOT) / ROYAL AIR FORCE / FOUND 16TH JULY 1941 / Cross / KNOWN UNTO GOD*”.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission will be approached to provide a replacement marker which adequately memorizes the three RAF Flight Sergeants lost during the 30 April 1941 sinking of the S.S. Nerissa.

In Closing

With the analysis and evidence provided by Anthony Hickey and myself, we are hopeful that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission with the support of British, Canadian and Irish authorities will someday act appropriately and provide the graves of the fallen with recognition honouring their lives and sacrifices.

We will remember them.

W.D.

Notes

- The National Archives of Ireland, Dublin
- Military personnel files, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa
- *Guarding Neutral Ireland: The Coast Watching Service and Military Intelligence, 1939-1945*, 1 May 2008, Michael Kennedy
- *The Tides of War, Mayo and the Battle of the Atlantic*, 30 August 2021, Anthony Hickey.