

HMML-373

Lieutenant Charles Ross Watt, RVNR

In its edition of March 12, 1919, the *Lanark Era* reported that “to Charles Watt belongs the distinction of sinking probably the last enemy submarine sunk during the war”.

On November 9th [1918], two days before the armistice was signed, a German sub, the U-34, was endeavoring to make her way through the Straits of Gibraltar, when observed by Lieutenant Watt, who dropped a ‘pill’ and succeeded in despatching it. For this feat he received prize money sufficient to ensure him a good time while on leave.

The *Era*’s account of Watt’s part in the sinking of that “last enemy submarine” in the Straits of Gibraltar was somewhat overstated but none-the-less highlights a unique experience of the Great War for a son of Lanark County.



Born far from the sea in the village of Lanark on January 23, 1890, Watt was the fifth of six children¹ born to James Watt (1857-1935) and Agnes Currie Stewart (1858-1930). His father operated Lanark’s Clyde Foundry:² a business that had been purchased by grandfather Thomas Watt (1834-1895) from the Dobbie family in 1863.

When war WW1 broke out, Charles Watt did not to follow the crowd of local volunteers enlisting with the Lanark County based 130th and 240th Infantry Battalions. Rather, he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), and he did so at Vancouver.

In 1911, Watt had followed his brother Edgar, to Kelso, Ontario, where he worked in a grocery store. He later joined another brother, Melville, at Edmonton³ and by 1916 was living at South Fort George, British Columbia⁴. Charles Watt’s arrival in B.C. was probably linked to construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, a line that reached South Fort George in January 1914, or to the paddle wheel steamboat service of the BC Express Company that had made South Fort George its Fraser River terminus from 1910.

¹ Melvin Thomas (1880-1953), Edgar John (1884-1943), Robert Lloyd (1886-1959), Russell Richardson (1893-1961), Mary Ellen (1896-1992), Thomas Ross (1890-1975), Cecil Watt (1900-1986). Second son, Lieutenant Colonel Edgar John Watt was instrumental in raising the 240th (Renfrew) Battalion in 1916. He was however struck off strength and returned to Canada in September 1917 under a cloud of ‘irregularities’ in the Battalion accounts. The affair may, however, have had more to do with Militia Department jealousies than accounting because the department did not press the matter.

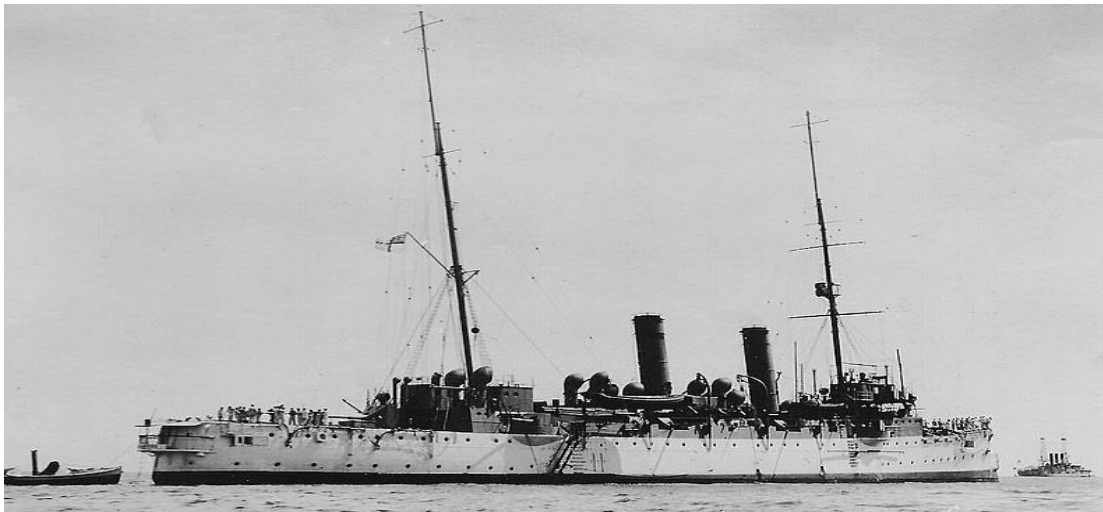
² Manufacturer of stoves, plows, etc.

³ Melville also moved on to Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1919. Brothers Russell and Robert and sister Mary also moved from Lanark to Vancouver.

⁴ Now Prince George, British Columbia.

When he enlisted with the RNVR in the spring of 1916, Watt was sent back east by rail and, on June 8th, was commissioned a Temporary Sub Lieutenant in the Imperial Service. Two days later, Lieutenant Watt sailed from Montreal aboard the SS *Sicilian* bound for Liverpool.

Upon reaching England Watt reported to HMS *Hermione* where he was enrolled in a three month course of instruction. *Hermione* was a Light Cruiser of 10 guns built in 1893. At the outbreak of war, she had been posted as Guard Ship at Southampton but in December 1916 was designated headquarters ship for Motor Launches and coastal Motor Boats, a role she would discharge through the course of the war. In September 1916, Sub Lieutenant Watt was sent on to complete his training aboard His Majesty's Motor Launch (HMML) No.151.



HMS Hermione

From the earliest months of the First World War, it became clear that the naval war would not only be about large fleets of capital ships and high seas battles. The advent of the submarine brought naval warfare to the coastal waters of Great Britain, endangering its supply lines by threatening its ports, seaways, inter-port transport, fishing, etc. The existing Auxiliary Patrol, composed of requisitioned trawlers, smacks, steamers, colliers, and so on, lacked the capability to protect the coastline and take the offensive in battle when required. So, in February 1915 a delegation of UK Government officials and Royal Navy officers travelled to New York and met with American engineers and boat builders to define and purchase vessels to better meet the urgent demands of coastal patrol.

The Royal Navy set stringent requirements. They demanded a minimum speed when fully loaded of 19 knots (35 kmph), combined with a cruising radius that required a fuel capacity of 2,000 gallons (9,100 litres, implying a weight of 12,000 lbs. or 5,400 kg. just for fuel). Further, the launches were to have the ability to accommodate a deadweight of 20,000 pounds (9,000 kg.), sufficient to carry the guns, ammunition, water, and supplies required. The boat also had to be seaworthy enough to maintain station in any weather and the Navy stipulated that the boats be of a size to fit four at a time on the deck of a steamer for transport across the Atlantic. In order to achieve the contracted delivery times and cost, the design arrived at was simple, and construction standardized.

In April 1915, the Electric Launch Company (Elco) of Bayonne, New Jersey, were contracted to provide 550 motor launches for delivery by November 16, 1916, at a total cost of \$22 million dollars or about \$40,000 per boat. By May 1, 1915, Elco had erected the frames of the first boats.

In order to maintain America's neutrality, the first batch of 50 vessels were sailed to Halifax for delivery. Subsequently, although all components were crafted in the U.S., the parts were shipped to Canada for final assembly at the shipyards of Canadian Vickers of Montreal (ML-51 through ML-260) and Davie Shipbuilding Lauzon, Quebec (ML-262 through ML-550). In order to meet delivery schedules Elco contracted a wide range of suppliers including Tiffany Studios of New York, producers of sculptures and lighting fixtures, who furnished bronze component assemblies such as rudders and quadrants.

The total order of 550 motor launches was shipped to England via 130 transport ships and delivered in 488 days, without a single loss. The first three vessels were commissioned at Portsmouth on October 14, 1915. In addition to the original order, another 30 were delivered later in 1917 making a total fleet of 581.



An example of the 581 Motor Launches built for the Royal Navy by Elco 1915-1917.

The WW1 Royal Navy motor launch was 85 feet (26 meters) long overall, with a beam of just over 12 feet (3.7 meters) and a draft of just under four feet (1.2 meters). The launches were powered by twin gasoline engines capable of driving the vessel at 22 knots (41 kmph) but producing an operative speed of about 19 knots (35 kmph) in normal sea conditions. The petrol tanks carried 1,850 gallons (7,000 ltrs.) providing an operational radius of about 500 miles (800 km.) at full speed or 1,000 miles (1,600 km.) at 12 to 15 knots or less.

Each motor launch was manned by a crew of ten; two officers, two motor mechanics, two leading seamen and four seamen. One of the seamen was detailed as the cook and each launch had two seamen trained in the use of the hydrophone. In a vessel of this size, space was at a premium, facilities were sparse, and comforts were few.

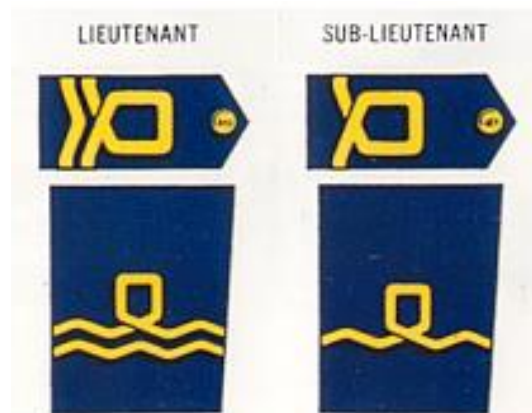
After delivery in England armaments were installed by the Royal Navy. Initially the primary weapon was a three-inch (75mm) 13-pounder field gun converted to a naval mounting, but these were shortly replaced by a Hotchkiss rapid firing 1.85 inch (47mm) three-pounder. MLs were equipped with four depth charges. The typical ML also carried at least one .303 calibre Lewis machine gun and an assortment of small arms (rifles, pistols, etc.). Many MLs were also equipped to lay or sweep mine and to lay smoke.



Three-inch Rapid Fire Hotchkiss Gun

Motor launches were deployed in flotillas of six craft throughout the various theatres of war – the English Channel and North Sea (at bases from Dover to Scapa Flow), Ireland and at French ports such as Dunkirk; in the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to the Adriatic, at Alexandria and Port Said, patrolling the Suez Canal, Beirut, and Tripoli. There was even a flotilla on the West Indies station.

On completing his final month of training aboard ML-151, in October 1916, Sub Lieutenant Charles Watt was named second-in-command of ML-373, posted to Gibraltar and the western Mediterranean. On June 8, 1917, the anniversary of his original commissioning, Watt was promoted Acting Lieutenant. Six weeks later, on July 27, 1917, he was confirmed a full Lieutenant and assumed command of ML-373.



According to his hometown newspaper, Charles Watt “engaged in the exhilarating sport of chasing submarines in the Mediterranean for over two years”.⁵ No details of that service have survived, however, until the night of November 8-9, 1918, just three days before the armistices of November 11th brought WW1 to an end. While Admiralty Report 239/26 shows that the version of events later reported by the *Lanark Era* may have overstated Watt’s achievement, it does show that he and his ML-373 crew were at least the first to engage German submarine U-34 that night.

⁵ *Lanark Era*, March 12, 1919.

November 8-9 [1918], 35/56 N. 05/25 W. (Gibraltar), Known (U-34).

At 23:26 [11:26 p.m.] on November 8, ML-373, in a position 3½ miles north-by-west of *Almina Point*⁶ sighted a submarine steering west and chased her. ML-155 sighted the same submarine and also proceeded to chase her. At 00:10 November 9, ML-373 fired a red *Very's Light*⁷ and five minutes later ML-155 again sighted the submarine submerging. She then dropped four depth-charges, one of which failed to explode. HMS *Privet* sighted the *Very's Light* and at 00:20 sighted the submarine on the surface about 70 yards distant on the Port bow. She at once increased speed to ram, but the submarine by increasing speed avoided her.

One round from the four-inch gun and one round from the Port 12-pounder were fired, the 4-inch shell securing a hit on the conning tower and the 12-pounder missing. At 00:23 the submarine commenced to dive, and HMS *Privet* starboarded her helm⁸ and opened fire with her starboard 12-pounder at point blank range. Five rounds were fired, of which three were hits. The submarine was then running on a parallel course to the *Privet*. At 00:26 HMS *Privet* released four depth-charges at ten seconds' intervals, all set to 100 feet.

After a further interval of 30 seconds HMS *Privet*, being about 60 yards ahead of the submarine, released a fifth depth-charged and fired both of her depth-charge throwers which straddled the submarine, after which nothing further was seen or heard of the submarine.

At 00:32 *Privet* doubled back over track. Three small objects were seen floating, but it was too dark to distinguish same at full speed.⁹

The sunken submarine, identified as U-34, and went down with all 38 officers and men. The kill was later confirmed by the Royal Navy and the crews of ML-373, ML-155, and HMS Q-19 *Privet* later shared in bounties awarded by the Prize Court. In its March 1919 account of the action, the *Lanark Era* reported that Lieutenant Watt was "now enjoying 30 days' leave in England and Scotland [having] received prize money sufficient to ensure him a good time ...". Once again the *Era* was a little off the mark. The admiralty did not distribute prize money until 1921.¹⁰

Commissioned in October 1914, *U-34* was 64.70 meters (212 ft 3 in) in length, with a beam of 6.32 meters (20 ft 9 in). Her top surface speed was 16.4 knots (30.4 km/hr.), and 9.7 knots (18.0 km/hr.) when submerged. Her cruising range was 8,790 nautical miles (16,280 km) at eight knots (15 km/hr.) on the surface, and 80 nautical miles (150 km) at five knots (9.3 km/hr.) under water. The submarine's diving depth was 50 m (164 ft 1 in).

⁶ The tip of Spanish North Africa (on the coast of Morocco) opposite Gibraltar.

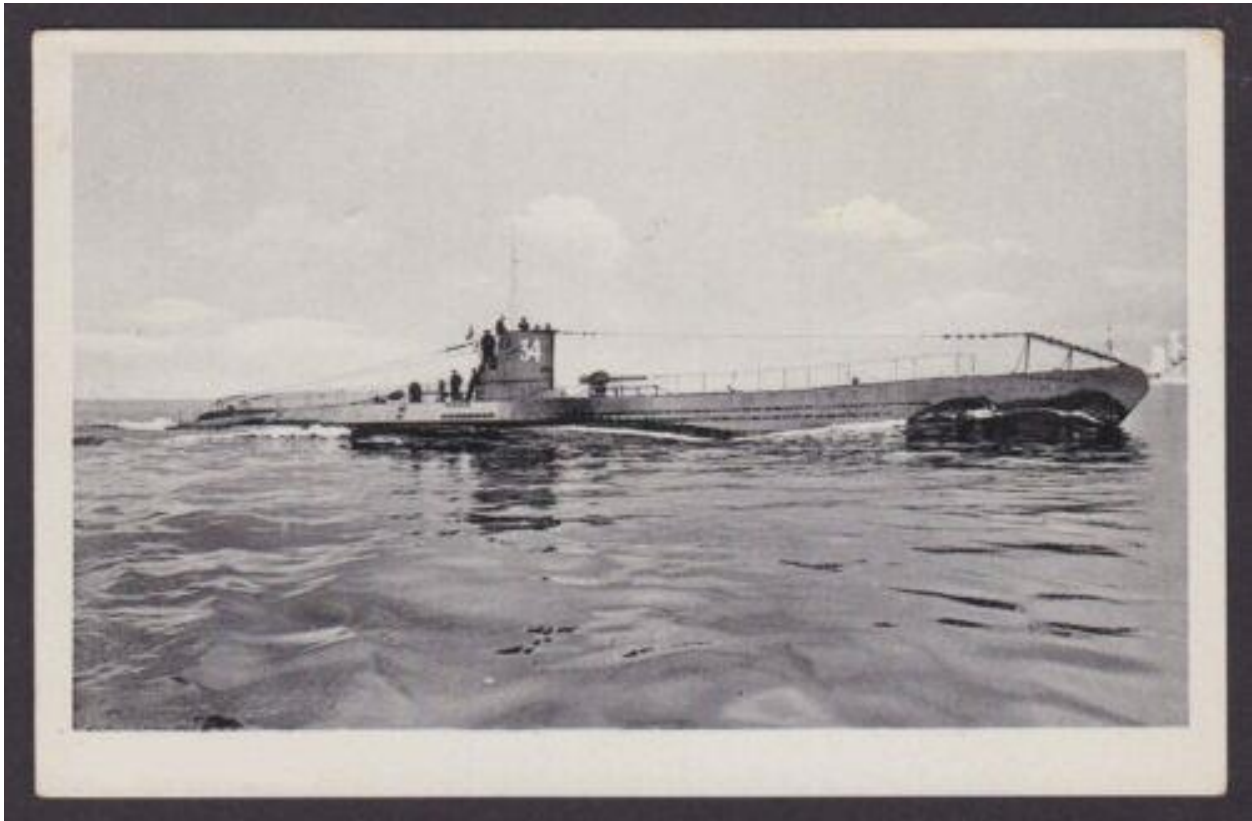
⁷ An illumination flare.

⁸ Turned right.

⁹ U. K. National Archives, Kew, File 'Reported Destruction of Submarines', ADM 239/26.

¹⁰ At the start of WW1 Britain announced that prize money would no longer be paid to individual ships' crews. Instead, money for prizes captured or destroyed was put into a fund and distributed evenly to all naval personnel when the war ended. The total amount distributed by Royal Navy Prize Court after the First World War totalled £15 million or \$67,000,000.

U-34 was armed with four 50 cm (20 in) torpedo tubes (two in the bow and two in the stern), and a 10.5 cm (4.1 in) deck gun. She carried six torpedoes and 250 rounds of ammunition for her deck gun.



SM U-34

HMS *Privet*, the ship that actually finished off U-34 was a Q-ship, also known in the Royal Navy as a 'special service ship', 'decoy vessel' or 'mystery ship', and by the Germans as *U-Boot-Falle* ('U-boat traps'). Q-ships like *Privet* were former cargo vessels, colliers, tramp steamers, trawlers, tankers, even sailing vessels, outfitted with hidden armaments -- usually one four-inch (102 mm) and two 12-pounder guns, a Maxim machine gun and depth charges. These were hidden behind a false superstructure, in fake deck cargo, and beneath dummy lifeboats. From time-to-time Q-ships also changed their disguises, in ways that altered their profile, and assumed different names.

In a day when submarines could carry very few torpedoes, U-boats preferred to extend their battle cruise by saving their torpedoes for armed opposition and sinking merchant shipping with their deck gun. The mission of Q-ships was to lure submarines to the surface, hoist the Royal Navy ensign, and sink their victim by ramming or with fire from their suddenly revealed weapons. U-34 was *Privet's* second victim, she had sunk U-85 off the island of Alderney in the English Channel in March 1917.



Q-19, HMS Privet

That night, Watt's ML-373, with ML-155 and HMS *Privet*, ended a very successful career. Over the course of the war U-34 had sailed 17 patrols, sunk 119 ships (257,652 tons), and damaged five more (14,208 tons). The U-boat had set out on its last patrol from the Port of Pola, Croatia, (then part of Austria-Hungary) under the command of Kapitanleutnant Johannes Klasing (1883-1918), on October 18, 1918. With the end of the war anticipated, on October 25th the Kaiserliche Marine sent out a message authorizing U-33 and U-34 to proceed directly back to Germany (via Gibraltar) if they had sufficient fuel and supplies.¹¹ However, their last confirmed contact with U-34 had been three days earlier on October 21st. U-34's three week silence between October 21st and November 9th has led to speculation that the submarine was lost prior to November 9th and that some other U-boat was sunk that night off Almina Point. However, no other U-boats seem to have been in the right place at the right time and only U-34 appears to be a candidate for the last German U-boat sunk in World War One.¹²

Five months later, on March 15, 1919, Lieutenant Charles Watt was transferred to post-war command of ML-293. In October that year he was called to *HMS Hermione* HQ and granted his discharge, effective "*from date of arrival in Canada*". He landed back in Canada on November 27, 1919, and the final entry in his service records notes his demobilization at Perth on November 30, 1919, rated a "*zealous, efficient and reliable*" officer.

¹¹ Seaworthy U-boats in the Mediterranean returned to Germany, boats that could not be immediately made seaworthy were scuttled.

¹² The German Navy's official history suggests that UB-51 might have been the boat attacked on November 8-9, 1918. UB-51 was not sunk, however, but returned to Germany, surrendered on January 16, 1919, and was broken up at Swansea, England, in 1922.

On leaving the Royal Navy Lieutenant Watt received payments of 'Hardlying Money' (HLM)¹³ for the period of October 1916 through November 7, 1919, and of 'Command Money'¹⁴ for October 1918 to November 7, 1919. He also received a War Service Gratuity \$905.20 and an unknown share of the 'Prize Money' due for sinking *U-34*.

Charles Ross Watt married Gertrude Mae Huston (1889-1948), of Stockton, Illinois, at Edmonton in 1921 and lived for a time in the United States. He later he worked at the family trade of foundryman in Vancouver and then as a salesman. Charles Watt died at Vancouver on November 2, 1975.

- Ron W. Shaw (2023)

¹³ The method of assessing the eligibility of any given ship for Hardlying Money (HLM) was arbitrary. It was payable to officers for *"time spent living and sleeping in ships employed on sea service at full rates when the living and sleeping conditions were not superior to those in a trawler and at half rates when the conditions were superior to those in a trawler but markedly inferior to those in a destroyer"*.

¹⁴ Three shillings and ninepence a day in addition to regular pay in compensation for performing duties equivalent to those of a vessel Captain.