

Text by Robert Osborne  
Photos by Debbie Stanley  
and George Sharrard

**Just knowing that Vikings started a settlement here a thousand years ago and that the first fishermen from Europe began arriving in the 1500's adds to a sense of history that cloaks the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It's a sense that I'm acutely aware of on this sunny day in June on board the vessel, *Ocean Quest*, as the skipper, Bill Flaherty, navigates across Conception Bay towards Bell Island. I'm on my way to dive on what are known as the "Bell Island Wrecks". These are not artificial reefs. These are ships that were part of a catastrophic historic event, four World War II cargo ships that were sunk by German U-boats. It's a history that Bill is only too happy to talk about as we motor along.**

The incident began on 4 September 1942. On a moonless night, *U-513* crept into the convoy anchorage in Conception Bay. How it got in is reminiscent of a plot from an old Hollywood war movie. *U-513* tucked itself under the stern of the *SS Evelyn B* and followed her into the anchorage.

Ships came to this harbor to load up on iron ore from the mines on Bell Island. The cargo was important for making steel crucial for the war effort. Naturally, German U-boats were interested in stopping that effort.

Bell Island in  
Conception Bay

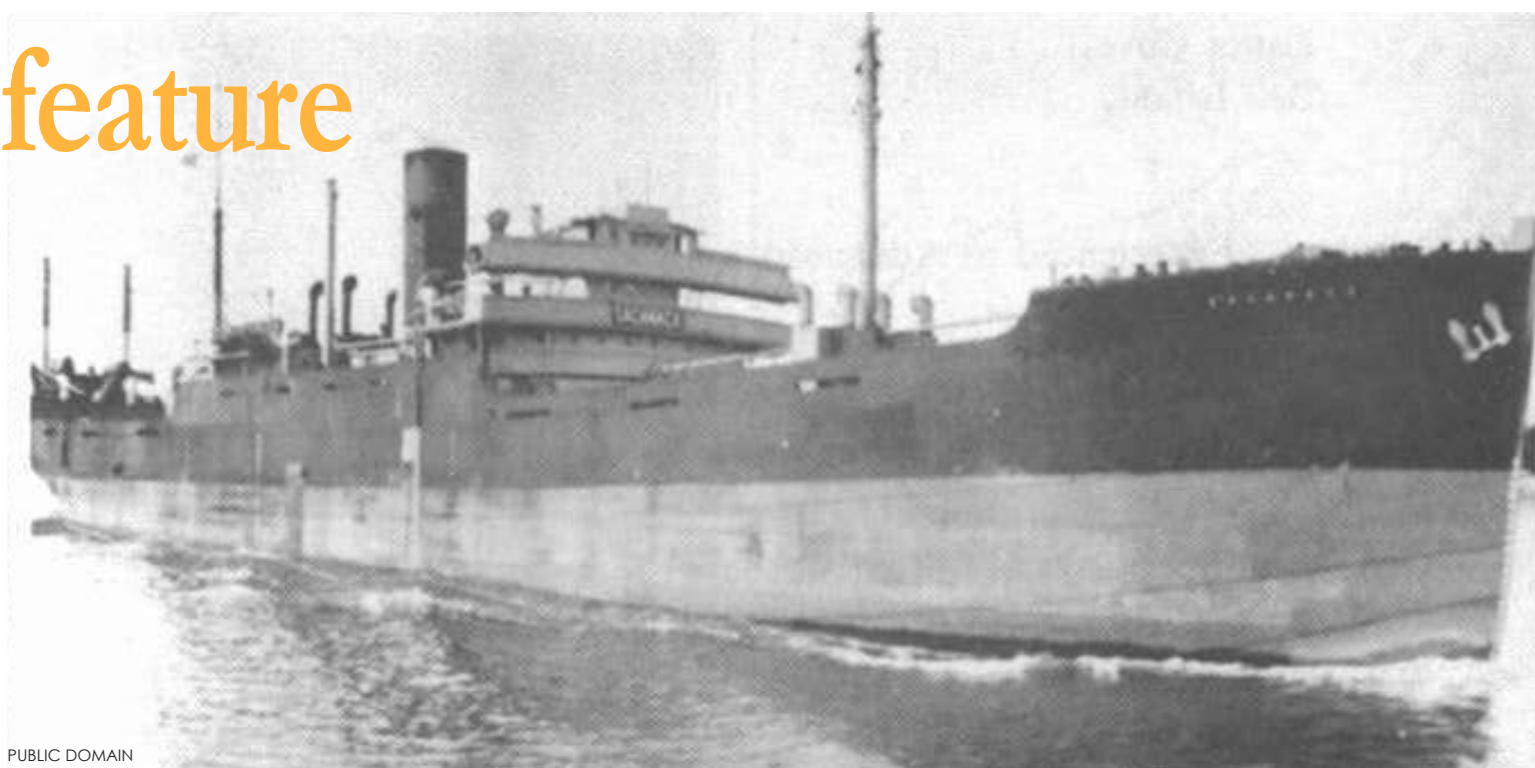
*WWII Battles in Conception Bay*

# Bell Island Wrecks

DEBBIE STANLEY







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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
The SS Saganaga; Diver in tor-  
pedo hole in the side of the  
wreck of PLM-27; U-513; U-518;  
Captain Rolf Rueggeberg

went down in minutes.

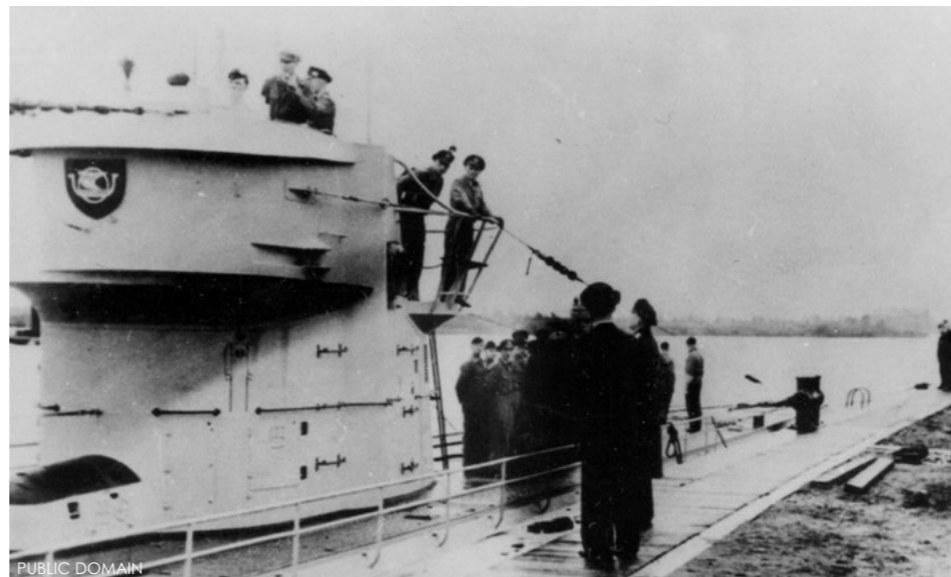
The water was now teeming with injured sailors—the anchorage filled with their cries. Shore guns, ineffectively positioned, attempted to come to bear on the action. Ships were still trying to get out of the bay even as small boats were setting out from Bell Island to rescue survivors. In the confusion, *U-513* slipped out into the Atlantic and disappeared.



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*Evelyn B*, the same ship *U-513* had followed into the harbour. The *Evelyn B* opened fire with its deck gun, forcing *U-513* to dive. From its submerged position, *U-513* selected another target—the *SS Saganaga*. She fired quickly. This time, there were no mistakes. Both torpedoes hit the ship. Filled with iron ore, the *Saganaga* went down in minutes.

The entire anchorage erupted in chaos. Ships were frantically trying to get underway to escape the U-boat. Rueggeberg selected another target. But in the confusion of the battle, as *U-513* maneuvered to get into position, the ship it had targeted—*SS Lord Strathcona*—swung around and hit the U-boat's conning tower. Though slightly damaged and



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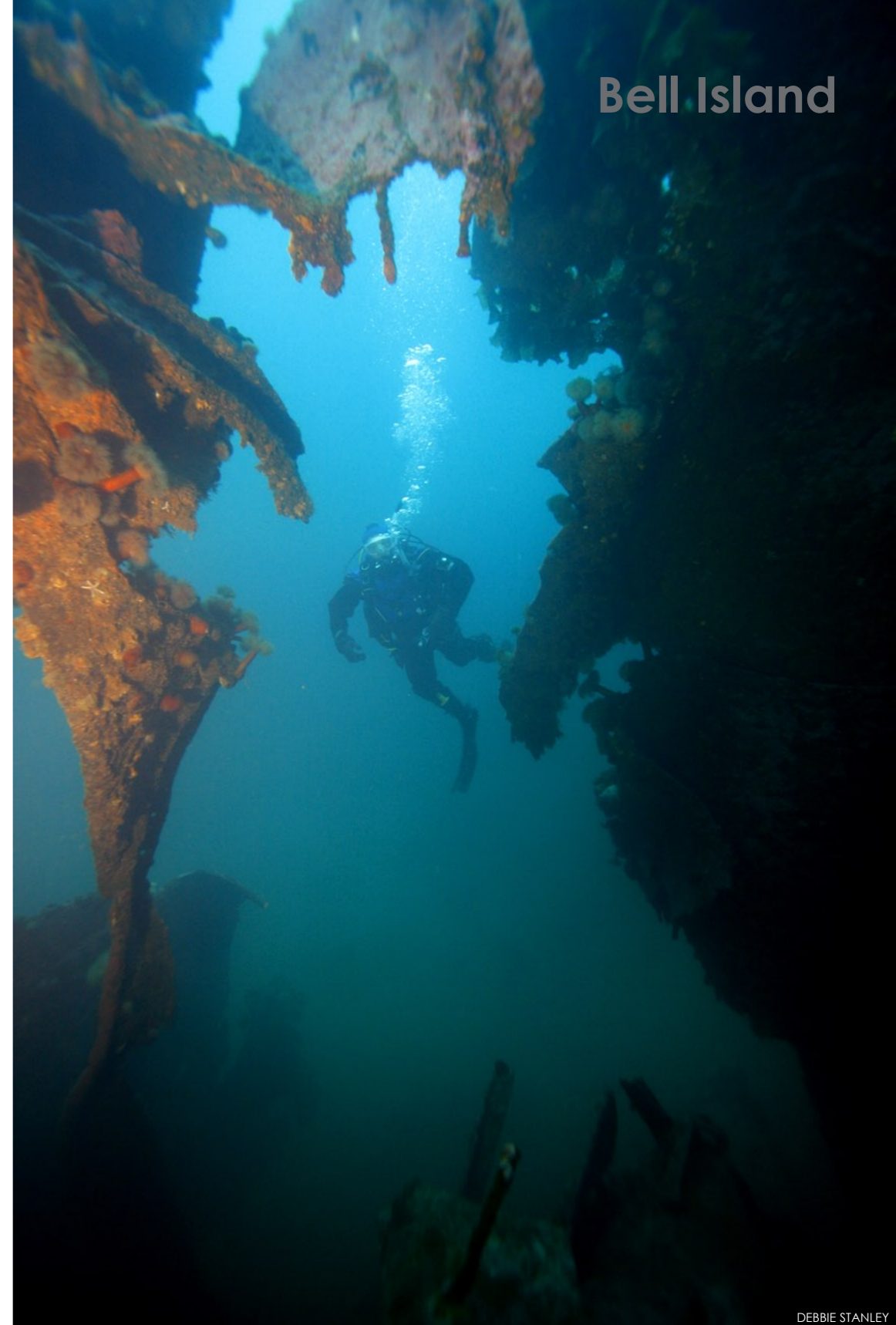
forced to the bottom, *U-513* recovered quickly. Without hesitation, she fired two torpedoes from her stern tubes. The *SS Lord Strathcona* was hit twice and also

Twenty-nine men died as a result of the attack—all from the *Saganaga*.

## Diving

Today, the consequences of those attacks lie underwater like broken and discarded toys waiting to be reclaimed. And I was about to dive down and explore them.

My guide was Debbie Stanley, one of the co-owners of Ocean Quest—a dive lodge on Conception Bay that specializes in diving the wrecks. She and her husband, Rick, have taken on



# Bell Island

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After arriving in the bay, Captain Rolf Rueggeberg of *U-513* decided to wait until the following day to attack. In the morning, Rueggeberg surfaced, selected a target—the *SS Lord Strathcona*—and fired. But the two torpedoes misfired. *U-513*'s crew hadn't armed their detonation switches. The torpedoes merely ran out of fuel and sank to the bottom. The sub was spotted ironically by the



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the role of unofficial custodians of the site. Though the wrecks are not designated as protected by Canada's federal government, every diver on board has been warned politely, but firmly to "take nothing but pictures and

leave nothing but bubbles". These wrecks are, after all, graves for dozens of sailors killed in action.

Rick and Debbie are fighting to have the wrecks declared National Historic Monuments in order to stop the occasional







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The SS Lord Strathcona (left); Sunset at Conception Bay (far left)

# Bell Island

way, I was shown a machine gun that sat on the deck, but I was not too keen to linger, my body was starting to get really cold. Nevertheless, after an hour surface interval, I was chomping at the bit to go down again.

The next dive was on the *Lord Strathcona* but not as deep and not as cold. This time, we headed straight for the bow. I got my picture taken doing my best "I'm the king of the world" imitation, poked my head into the room where an old Marconi radio was still attached to the wall and spent a few minutes playing with a flat fish.

As we neared the ascent line, we encountered a large jellyfish called a Lion's Mane. With their venomous sting, they're usually given a wide berth. But this one has drifted into the wreck and

pillaging. "Every time I swim past a box of bullets on the deck, there's a few more bullets missing," Rick explained. "And the brass plaque on the lifeboat was pried off last year."

## SS Lord Strathcona

Deb and I geared up and dropped over the side and down the mooring line towards the *SS Lord Strathcona*—a Canadian ship of 7,335 tons some 406 feet long. She sat between 90 and 125 feet, and as we approached, my first thought was that it looked as though I was swimming towards a coral reef. Of course, I knew that was absurd. But on this sunny day the light penetrated down, dappling the ship with bands of light and creating an explosion of gold, pinks, oranges and purples—all different-colored sea anemones. They encased large parts of the super structure creating the appearance of a wreck covered with coral.

The visibility was surreal. As I hovered just above what would have been the super structure, I was able to see half way to the stern of the ship. Remember, this was a 400-foot-long cargo ship. I'm

guessing the visibility was at least 100 plus feet.

Deb signaled to me, and we descended a few more feet where she introduced me to one of the resident lumpfish.

Now, there may be uglier fish in the ocean, but if there are, I've yet to see them. Think the Hunchback of Notre Dame—this fish looks as if it's survived a seriously disfiguring accident some time in its life. Then Debbie panned her light across the creature, and the beast

transformed into a beauty—vibrant colors, pinks and greens lit up on the lumpfish. Something about ugly ducklings and fairy tales coming true sprang to mind. Debbie signaled me again, and we headed towards the stern.

By the way, did I mention that the water was brisk? Perhaps brisk isn't the right adjective, possibly bone numbing is more accurate. The average temperature on this day was around 39°F.

Later, I would find out that it could get even colder. For example, when I was

deep in the *SS Rose Castle*, I experienced temperatures as low as 36°F. Some of the tech divers report 28°F deep in the holds where the water doesn't move. Dry

suits are a must, serious undergarments recommended. The bottom line is that the temperature is the price you have to pay for these sensational dives.

Fifteen minutes into the dive and Debbie had taken me to the stern. An old 4.7-inch deck gun sat covered with multi-colored sea life. I could still make out the unmistakable shape of a weapon, but the shawl of plumose anemones removed any threatening qualities. We circled the gun a couple of times and headed back to the ascent line. On the



GEORGE SHARRARD



DEBBIE STANLEY

Ammunition on deck area (right); Diver and lumpfish (far right)







GEORGE SHARRARD

become entangled. We swam in for a closer look. Moments later, I was also introduced to another local denizen—the Ocean Pout. I was immediately struck by its uncanny resemblance to the rock star, Mick Jagger, or perhaps Steve Tyler?

As we headed back into port (stuffing our faces with homemade moose meat stew to warm up), past the sheer cliffs of Bell Island, weaving among a couple of tankers anchored in the bay, the sun beating down, I was beginning to sense that this was going to be a very special week of diving.

## SS Saganaga & PLM-27

The following morning, the skies were blue once again, and the seas were calm. We headed out to explore a couple of different wrecks. In the morning, we would dive the shallowest of the wrecks, *PLM-27* (Paris, Lyon, Marseilles)—a Free French ship I was told was caught in the second round of U-boat attacks; and in the afternoon, we would dive the *SS Saganaga*. Once again, on the way out Bill gave me the history.

It was 2 November 1942, only two months after the first attack. If people thought the first attack had been an anomaly, they were sadly

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Ocean pout; Radio room on the *Rose Castle*; Divers check out a lion's mane jellyfish tangled in the wreckage

mistaken. This time, *U-518* slipped quietly into the bay. To avoid detection, she hugged the cliffs of the mainland so closely that her bridge crew reported seeing cars driving along the roads of the mainland. This time, the captain—Captain Friedrich Wissmann—decided on a night attack. But his first shot was no truer than that of his earlier counterpart. *U-518* fired at a coal boat moored near the Scotia Pier. The torpedo missed and instead hit the pier causing substantial damage. Wissmann's second two shots would not go astray. *U-518* swung around and lined up a shot on the *SS Rose Castle*. Two torpedoes were fired in quick succession. Both found their marks—one in the stern and one in the bow. The *Rose Castle* went down in minutes. The attack was unexpected and, of the 43 crew,

28 men lost their lives.

*U-518* continued its attack. The Free French ship, *PLM-27*, was moored near the *Rose Castle*. She had fired flares to help survivors from the torpedoed ship. *U-518* used the light to line up a perfect shot. *PLM-27* took a torpedo dead amid ship. She was split almost perfectly in two and sank in seconds. Twelve men



GEORGE SHARRARD



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died.

This time, it was snowing and cold when the attacks took place. There were no rescue boats in the area. Eighty-six-year-old, Gordon Hardy, survived the attack on the *Rose Castle*. He painted a picture of a Dantesque Hell. He remembers being in his bunk amidships

when the first torpedo struck. He jumped into the frigid water in his underwear just as the second torpedo hit. He spent hours clinging to a raft listening to the screams of other men around him in the dark. The cold was almost unbearable. He told of seeing some men die even as they were being pulled from the water. Once again, in the confusion, *U-518*, slipped out of the bay and back into the Atlantic.

It's a horrifying story, but hard to imagine on a warm sunny spring morning. However, that was about to change. Deb and I suited up and quickly descended to the wreck of the *PLM-27*. As with the other wrecks, *PLM-27* sat upright on the bottom. She was relatively shallow, sitting in only 60 to 80 feet of water. After a quick look at the propeller, we worked our way forward from the stern towards amidships. Debbie swam through a



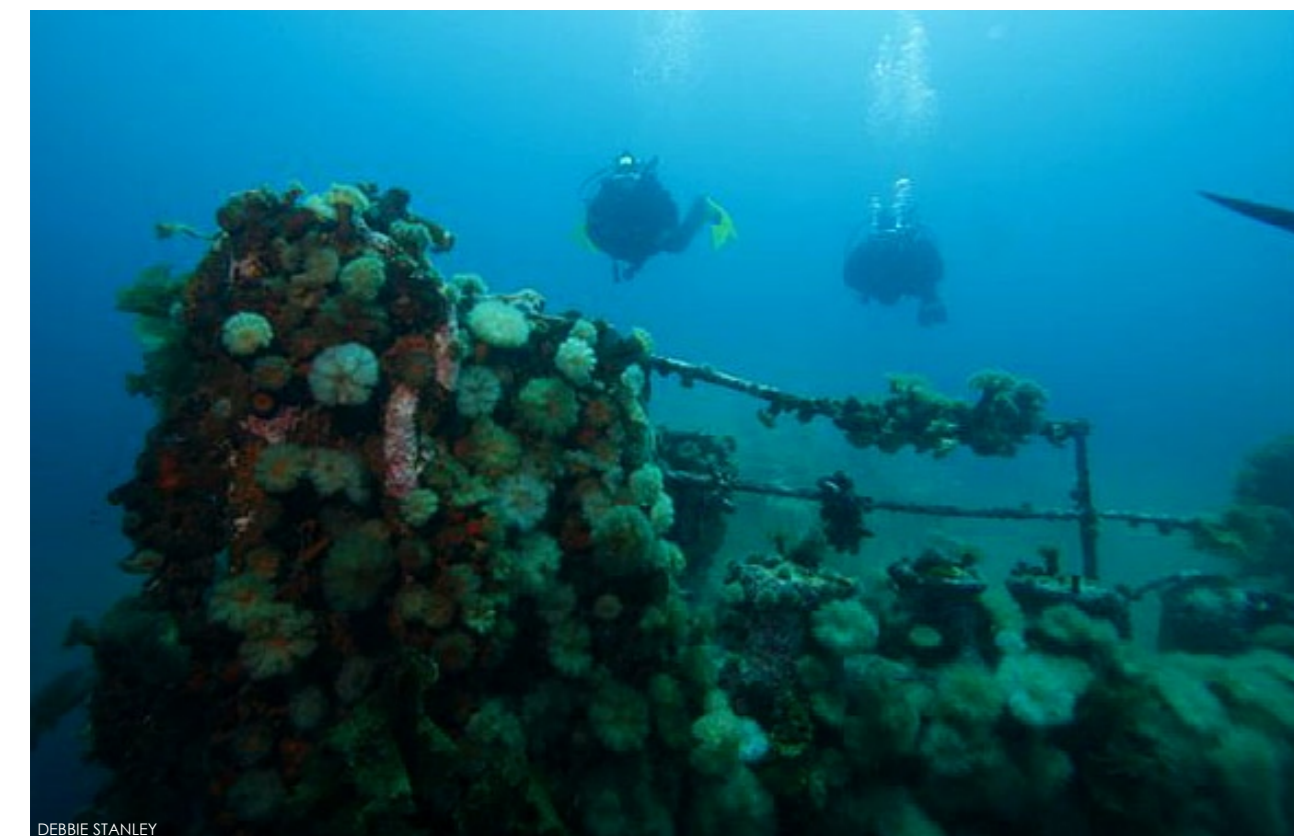




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gap in the side of the ship, stopped and gestured for me to look around. At first I was puzzled. Look at what? I was floating in the middle of a large hole in the side of the ship.

Then, it dawns on me. This was a wound from a torpedo. The two-inch steel hull was jagged and peeled back like so much aluminum foil. I was awestruck by the scale of the destruction. To be in the vicinity of an explosion capable of ripping a ship open like a cardboard box must have been a terrifying experience. How anyone lived through this explosion is beyond my comprehension. I felt a deep sadness for the sailors who were caught

in this attack. Particularly when I remembered that many floated and died in the freezing water after surviving the explosion. It's little wonder Deb and Rick are fighting so hard to get this area declared protected. I understood it as a debt owed the men who died on these ships.

A sober feeling followed me for the rest of the day. I enjoyed exploring the wreck of the *SS Saganaga*, but I couldn't get the image of that torpedo hole out of my mind. In fact, that haunted sensation was only reinforced when I was shown the anchor of the *Saganaga*. A massive piece of iron, it must have weighed a couple of tons.



DEBBIE STANLEY

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Divers at the bow, interior, deck gun and anchor of the *SS Saganaga*





DEBBIE STANLEY

## Bell Island

COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A diver explores the *PLM-27*; The *Rose Castle*; Diver inside the *PLM-27*; Writer Robert Osborne

*Robert Osborne is a Canadian writer and based in Toronto, with 25 years as a journalist in television news and seven years as a dive writer. Visit: [www.canadiandiver.ca](http://www.canadiandiver.ca)*



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And yet it lay discarded half way along the ship, blown from the bow some 275 feet away as casually as a letter tossed across a table.

### SS Rose Castle

Day three and we were exploring the deepest of the wrecks—the *SS Rose Castle*. She was also the most intact. In fact, it was a little eerie to swim among

the upright masts and cranes that looked almost ready to use. She was also the coldest dive and bottom time (at well over 110 feet to the deck) was fairly limited for recreational divers. But we did have just enough time to reach the massive stern gun.

By the end of the week, I had managed to put in four days of diving on the wrecks. I was struck by three

thoughts. First of all, that anything I thought I knew about diving in Newfoundland and Labrador was wrong. I had imagined Newfoundland and Labrador's waters to be dark and cold, with low visibility and not much to see anyway. I was right about the cold, but dead wrong about what was there to explore and how clearly it could be seen. I've dived tropical waters that would be put to shame by the stunning viz and rich life of Conception Bay.

My second thought was that not only had I dived some of the best wrecks of my life, but I had been touched by a sense of profound history that had given added meaning to the experience. My final thought was for the men who endured those two nights back in 1942. I was left with a deep respect for anyone who lived and died in the battles around Bell Island. ■



DEBBIE STANLEY