

# A Tribute to Fern Blodgett Sunde (1918-1991): First female radio operator (“Sparks”) to go to sea...

## Debra Dupuis

In 2020, the Cobourg Museum Foundation and a committee of volunteers will commemorate Fern Blodgett Sunde, the first female wireless radio operator (“Sparks”) at sea. She served during the Battle of the Atlantic (1939-1945), making numerous North Atlantic crossings aboard a Norwegian merchant vessel, the *M/S Mosdale*. It was incredibly dangerous – the *Mosdale*, a fruit carrier, was one of six sister ships to start out in 1940. Only the *Mosdale* survived the war.

A bronze statue and plaque in remembrance of Fern, and of all Canadians who served at sea during the Battle, will be erected at the Cobourg, Ontario waterfront. Sculptor Tyler Fauvelle, whose work includes more than a dozen public monuments in Ontario, three of which are military commemorations, will create the statue of Fern. The unveiling ceremony will take place on October 17, 2020. Next year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII, and of the Battle of the Atlantic. October is Women’s History Month in Canada.

We’d be so grateful if readers contributed to the commemoration. Details are provided at the end of this article.

## Fern Blodgett Sunde Commemoration

How did a young Canadian find herself the only woman aboard an Allied merchant ship, operating a wireless radio on the high seas during the Battle of the Atlantic? Good question, considering that this was more than 40 years before the Royal Canadian Navy permitted women to serve at sea, and a half-century before Britain’s Royal Navy allowed it.

Fern Alberta Blodgett was born in Regina, Saskatchewan and grew up in Cobourg, Ontario. She often sat by the waterfront, watching the Great Lakes steamers go by. Fern dreamed of a career at sea, but that dream made no sense at all for a girl born at the end of the Great War. Adventures at sea were for boys only, and that was that.

She started to train as a nurse in 1936, but quickly figured out that it wasn’t her calling. She completed Business School in 1939 and worked as a stenographer in Toronto.

When Canada entered the war in 1939, Fern was determined to find a seafaring way to serve her country. Learning that there was a shortage of seagoing wireless operators, Fern decided to take evening

classes and earn a Professional Radio Operator’s Certificate. She was turned down by the first couple of schools. As she said to Olive Carroll (who worked as a deep sea Sparks after the war): “Two [schools] said they had never had a woman student and they didn’t intend to start now.” (*Canadians at War 1939-1945*, Vol. 1, Reader’s Digest, 1969)

Fern was finally accepted at a third school. Almost 18 months later, she became the first Canadian woman to earn a Second Class Wireless Operator’s certificate.

Now, she needed a ship.

As fate would have it, a young seagoing radio operator suddenly quit, figuring he’d be safer on the Great Lakes. That left Captain Gerner Sunde of the *M/S Mosdale*, a Norwegian merchant ship, stuck at port in Montreal. His ship was fully-loaded and he needed to head for England. An urgent call went out, and that call reached Fern’s school. She received her certificate the same day her Principal asked if she was serious about going to sea – Friday, the 13th day of June, 1941.

Imagine the look on Captain Sunde’s face when he realized that his new hire, “F. Blodgett”, was a young woman. Sparks were always men, so he was unsure whether she could work aboard ship. Besides, Canada didn’t allow it, and that rule also applied to Allied ships in Canadian ports. Strangely, regulations in Norway didn’t have a thing to say about it. Initially, the Admiralty said no. Eventually, it was left up to Captain Sunde.

The next thing Fern knew, she was headed for deep sea.

What those first days must have been like! Fern was the only woman aboard a 3,000 ton ship. She was just shy of her 23rd birthday, had never been to sea, and was fresh out of radio school. She received a few hours’ orientation, and then was left alone in the radio room, with instructions written in languages she didn’t know. One mistake could be deadly.



Fern Blodgett Sunde: the first female wireless radio operator (“Sparks”) at sea.

The sea as battlefield held all kinds of danger – U-boats, surface raiders, storms, fog and naval mines. On top of it all, Fern was miserably seasick.

Bets were probably circulating all over the ship – it was doubtful she’d even make the return voyage.

Fern didn’t quit. She put a bucket nearby, stayed at her post, and did her job.

She wasn’t oblivious to the danger: “I wondered whether I would be a woman or a wireless operator if we were torpedoed. As a woman, I could be expected to head for the lifeboats. As a wireless operator, as the ship’s “Sparks”, I’d be expected to remain on duty. I decided I’d be a wireless operator.” (RD, 1969)

Fern’s family were not pleased when she trained as an operator. Now, they really had something to worry about – the Battle of the Atlantic.

The Battle of the Atlantic (1939-1945) was the fierce struggle between the Allied and Axis powers for control of sea lanes and vital supply lines to Britain. It was the longest continuous campaign of WWII – tonnage had to get through, the Allies had to be sustained in the fight.

When Nazi Germany invaded neutral Norway in 1940, most of Norway's merchant fleet was at sea. Although the Germans ordered them home, not one turned back. The King and his government went into exile. From there, they formed Nortraship (the Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission), and arranged with Britain to turn over all the free ships to the service of the Allies. Fern was one of many Canadians and Britons to sail the North Atlantic with Nortraship. From 1940 until the end of the war, Norway lost over 3,600 merchant mariners and roughly half of its fleet.

The Sparks (named after spark-gap transmitters) maintained the links between the ships and land-based stations. Operators provided aids to navigation, weather information and radio-direction finding, as well as visual signalling. They usually handled clerical and purser functions.

If their ship was under attack, the Sparks had to get rid of the code books, no matter what – they could not fall into enemy hands. It was their job to transmit the ship's name and position in the event of a submarine sighting, torpedo attack, surface raid or other emergency.

Their main responsibility was to listen – signals were in Continuous Wave (CW), keyed in Morse Code. The operators had to decode messages to see whether they applied to their ship or convoy. The formats changed often. A missed or incorrectly-decoded message could lead the ship to disaster. The emergency frequency commanded their utmost attention.

The *Mosdale* was never torpedoed, but there were many close calls. It was chased by submarines, and sometimes separated from convoys during violent storms. Navigating through naval mines in an uncharted minefield was particularly harrowing. When the Axis powers stepped up their attacks, Fern heard frequent distress calls. Other times, she saw exactly what torpedoes could do to a ship. As Fern admitted, "...our nerves got pretty frayed." (RD, 1969) When her family tried to persuade her to leave, she said: "Until the Nazis are defeated, this is where I belong." (S.V. Saghus, "Fern Sunde, Krigsseiler")

By the end of the war, the *Mosdale* had made 96 transatlantic voyages – more than any other Allied ship. Fern was aboard for 78 of those crossings. For a time, she was the ship's only Sparks. After regulations changed, two more operators were hired; Fern was the Chief Operator.

In 1942, Fern Blodgett married her Captain, Gerner Sunde, in St. John, New Brunswick. No time for a honeymoon – they went right back to sea, in convoy.

Haakon VII of Norway visited Fern and Gerner in 1943, presenting them with awards for their wartime service. Fern was the first woman to receive the Norwegian War Medal.

Fern's remarkable story became an unexpected beacon, leading to a small sisterhood of Sparks at sea. Twenty-one Canadian women followed in her footsteps, serving as operators on Norwegian merchant ships during the war. Several more women (mainly Canadian and Norwegian) pursued careers as Sparks after WWII ended, until new technology in the 1980s and early 1990s replaced wireless radios.

Fern and her Captain braved the North Atlantic together until the end of the war, and for a brief time during its aftermath. Their daughter, Fern Sunde Sletten, says her mother continued to work at sea, on and off, until 1952, when she left blue water to raise a family and work in her beautiful garden. When Gerner Sunde died suddenly at sea, in January 1962, Fern stayed in Norway, the only home her two daughters knew. She never remarried. Her daughter, Fern, said that whenever she and her sister, Solveig Ann, tried to raise the subject with their mother, Fern Sunde only would say: "There will always just be one true love for me."

The Battle of the Atlantic ended on May 8, 1945. Some 3,500 Allied vessels were lost, the vast majority of them merchant ships. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission estimates that the Allied naval services and merchant marine lost more than 80,000 people, although no one will ever know everything and everyone the Battle took.

In Norway, seafarers who served on merchant vessels during WWI and WWII are called "krigsseilers" – literally, "war sailors". Fern Alberta Blodgett Sunde, Canadian Sparks and courageous krigsseiler, died September 19, 1991.



King Haakon VII of Norway presenting Fern with an award for her wartime service.

The following books are fascinating accounts of life at sea for the female Sparks, both during and after WWII. Some of them are out of print but you can find used copies online by doing a search.

## References

"Deep Sea 'Sparks': A Canadian Girl in the Norwegian Merchant Navy", Olive J. Carroll, Cordillera Publishing Company, Vancouver, 1992. Olive Carroll (Roekner) has worked to tell Canadians the story of Fern Blodgett Sunde and the female Sparks at sea, through her books and articles.

"Quite the Gal!", Betty Lake Ottersen and Helen Lake Westall, Wireless Publishing, Peterborough, 2002

The following book is about the "Lucky" *Mosdale*, but it is out of print and there is no English translation available:

"Lykkelige Mosdale; sagaen om et skip; Eiliv Odde Hauge, Eides, 1954

## How to Contribute

If you would like to help with the commemoration, please make your donation payable to: Cobourg Museum Foundation Inc. The Foundation is a registered charity and will issue a tax receipt for donations of \$25 and over

By mail: 55 King Street West, Cobourg, Ontario K9A 2M2. You can find it online at <https://www.cobourgmuseum.ca/> For more information please contact Leona Woods, Committee Chair at [leonaewoods@gmail.com](mailto:leonaewoods@gmail.com).

