

# ACTION STATIONS!

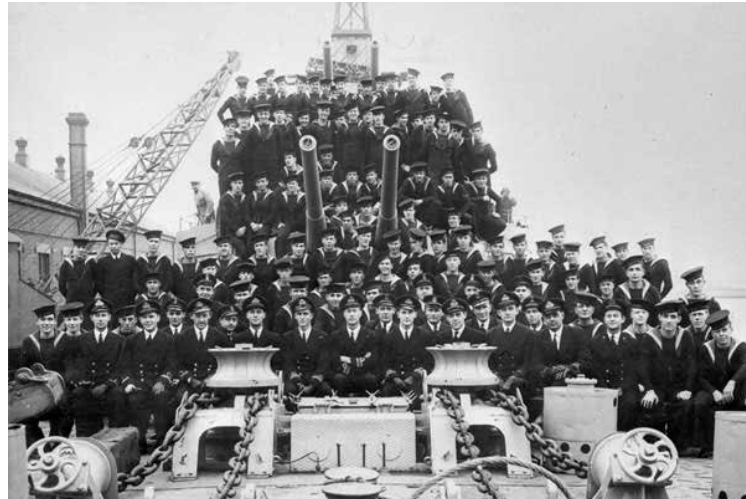
CANADA'S NAVAL MEMORIAL MAGAZINE  
Volume 36 - Issue 1, Spring 2017



# ACTION STATIONS!

Volume 36 - Issue 1  
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## Our Cover



*HMCS Athabaskan's ship's company portrait, 1944.*

In the early hours of 29 April 1944, HMC Ships *Haida* and *Athabaskan* were conducting mine-laying operations near the tip of the Brittany peninsula in the English Channel. At 0238 *Athabaskan's* radar picked up "two small objects traveling at high speed" near the Isle of Ushant. At the same time, Plymouth radioed "to intercept at full speed." *Haida* fired starshell, illuminating German Elbing Class destroyers T-24 and T-27, 7300 yards away. The two Elbings, sheltering in Morlaix for repairs, were making a run for their home base of Brest under the cover of darkness. Despite taking evasive action, turning thirty degrees to present a reduced target, German torpedoes found *Athabaskan*, destroying her stern and killing her after crews. With her propulsion out of action, *Athabaskan* was dead in the water. Her captain John Stubbs reported: "I'm hit and losing power" and ordered the crew to stand by to abandon ship. On fire, *Athabaskan* starting taking on water, more than her pumps could manage. A second report from Stubbs amplified the gravity of the situation: "It looks quite serious. Am steering aft." Before continuing the chase *Haida* laid a smoke screen to protect *Athabaskan* from further attacks.

Ten minutes later a massive explosion amidships ripped through the ship. Many of the crew including the captain were catapulted over the side. Shortly after her stern went under and her bow came up and *Athabaskan* slipped to her watery grave.

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# Features

- 11 Interrupted Voyage
- 16 Royal Canadian Navy Benevolent Fund
- 18 RCAF Involvement in the Battle of the Atlantic:  
Turning the Tide
- 24 Canada's Merchant Navy:  
The Men Who Saved The World
- 30 They Were Young
- 32 Namesake Ships
- 34 HMCS Athabaskan takes final salute  
after 44 years of dedicated service

## Departments

- 04 Executive Reports  
07 Crossed the Bar  
36 Book Review  
37 Mail Bag

## HMCS ATHABASKAN

*This issue of Action Stations is dedicated to HMC Ships named Athabaskan and all those who have served in them.*

Arctic, 1943-44;  
English Channel, 1944;  
Korea, 1950-53;  
Gulf and Kuwait



*Vice-Admiral Percy W. Nelles, Chief of the Naval Staff, addressing the Ship's Company of HMCS Athabaskan, Plymouth, England, 14 April 1944. LAC/PA-113723*



*HMCS Haida's motor cutter recovered six HMCS Athabaskans and sputtered across the English Channel, arriving in Penzance, Cornwall, 30 hours later. LAC/PA-152033*



*Canadian Red Cross volunteers greet Athabaskan sailors with candy and cigarettes after rescue by Haida. LAC/PA-166523*

# From the Chair

by Captain (Navy) ret'd Bryan Elson



Chair of the Board of Directors, CNMT, Bryan Elson (right) and his son and CNMT Director, Dr. Christopher Elson toasting the season onboard HMCS Sackville, Christmas 2016.

It has been nearly six months since my last column. At that time the ship had just returned to the dockyard after a very successful downtown summer, and already we are looking ahead to the summer of 2017. Building on his very productive ship - host programme Bert Walker has just sponsored a workshop that will enhance the Duty Trustee programme this year and make for an even better visitor experience.

After in-depth consideration the Board of Directors has decided not to proceed with its Chase the Ace initiative, at least at this time, since it has not been possible to identify qualified personnel to drive the plan. Active planning is under way for the Battle of the Atlantic Concert and for the Battle of the Atlantic Dinner, both of which will take place in new venues this year.

The short term preservation of the ship has been an active issue over the winter. It is now nearly nine years since the ship's last docking, three year's overdue. There are indications that a docking window will open this fall after the ship's return from downtown. However, Maritime Forces Atlantic (Marlant) still awaits National Defence Headquarters approval of the

docking Provision of Services Agreement, which is a pre-requisite for work to commence. In view of the overdue docking, Marlant has undertaken to up-date the previous internal hull survey and to formalize the arrangements for Dockyard Fire Department emergency assistance before the ship moves downtown.

Under the stellar leadership of George Borgal, the Trust's Project Working Group Committee has made great strides with an innovative approach to securing concrete financial support for Battle of the Atlantic Place (BOAP). While nothing is certain, there is good reason to believe that interim funding may become available sooner than had been anticipated. It may then be possible to stand up the Battle of the Atlantic Society to assume its intended role as developer of the facility, which up to now has been the responsibility of the Trust.

That will leave the Trust free to carry out its own responsibilities with respect to BOAP, namely to continue to operate and restore the ship and above all to ensure its preservation up until the point at which it is physically embodied in the facility. All of this will continue to take time. It has already been thirty-three years since the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust (CNMT) was formed, and over that period the dedicated effort and donations of thousands of Trustees has created the irreplaceable center-piece that is the ship today.

As the present watch of Trustees we must commit to continuing those efforts throughout the many years it will take for BOAP to come to fruition. Looking ahead, there is no obvious reason why the Trust should not continue as a going concern after BOAP completion, albeit in a manner consistent with whatever the new circumstances may turn out to be. Certainly decisions as to its future will be made by the membership. In any event, the facility must include prominent and striking visual recognition of the debt owed by BOAP and by Canada to the thousands of volunteers without whose devoted efforts the new icon could not have been brought to life.

# Captain's Cabin

by Lieutenant Commander ret'd Jim Reddy

It is early Spring in Nova Scotia but far more "wintry" than usual. During a February southeasterly blow, the forward log fender broke clear which resulted in the port bow rubbing against the jetty and scraping some paint. While this damage was very minor, it does highlight the need to tend daily to the old corvette - as we do. Incidentally, all this occurred on a Monday "storm day" for which the Base and Dockyard were "closed." RCN personnel making regular rounds reported the situation, action was taken, and fenders were put in place to protect our bow: indicative of the genuine concern and team effort in the care and custody of Canada's Naval Memorial.

The usual winter maintenance proceeds. Our large, downtown gangway is in for repair and repainting.

To simplify our fuel arrangements for the furnace and generator we have taken out of action one of our two diesel tanks and consolidated to using one. Engine room beautification is underway, as our original triple expansion engine, which we can move with a hydraulic motor, remains one of our unique attractions.

In the coming weeks we will be sprucing up the ship and tweaking our displays before shifting to our downtown berth in June. As part of this preparation, we are undergoing a hull survey to confirm our fitness and floating integrity alongside.

Trustees will be well aware that for some years now the embarkation of large groups for the at sea Battle of the Atlantic committal ceremony onboard has been deemed questionable. As the Chair notes in his column, we expect this issue to be resolved later this year with the anticipated docking. So as we approach the BOA remembrances for 2017 in early May, we are again

supported by the Navy with the assignment of HMCS *Montreal* to assist in our commemorations. While I miss not sailing *Sackville* (under the Queen's Harbour Master's tug power) for BOA Sunday, our service in a magnificent, modern frigate lends all the dignity and style that this special event needs, not to mention the comfort and shelter of a large hangar.

This summer on the Halifax waterfront is shaping up to be memorable. Tall Ships 2017, linked to Canada 150, will bring the largest assembly of sailing vessels to Halifax since the millennium year. We provide our conference room as a working office for the Liaison Officer team and the whole ship is available for after-hours events. This year, the Navy's sail training vessel HMCS *Oriole* will visit from Esquimalt for

the first time since the 1980s. Later this year, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Halifax Explosion will be observed. A significant naval aspect will be the visit of RCN engineering BOA veterans Vice Admiral Bob Stephens and Captain (N) Rolfe Monteith whose fathers were serving in Halifax at the time.

Looking ahead to May 2018 when, once again, a CNMT team will travel to Londonderry, Northern Ireland to participate in BOA ceremonies and in particular to attend the consecration of the third and final "Triangle Run" commemorative bell destined for St. John's, NL (The bell "trilogy" was described in the past summer Action Stations.) We have been participating in this event since 2005 when Ray Soucie made contact with the Royal Naval Association - Londonderry Branch and organized the first pilgrimage. We have been treated like family ever since. Trustees are encouraged to sign up for this outstanding memorable and historical experience.



Jim Reddy presenting the Captain's coin to Rolfe Monteith at his home in Brockweir, England for his ongoing commitment to promoting the CNMT in the UK.

# Executive Director's Report

*Do You Hear There?*

## Duty Trustees:

I anticipate that 2017 will be an outstanding tourist season with additional visitors to the region and to HMCS *Sackville* likely due to the 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Confederation and Tall Ships Halifax 29 July – 01 August. We expect to have more Duty Trustees than last year, and we have applied again for a grant for Interpretive Guides through the Canada Summer Jobs Program – please consider volunteering as a Duty Trustee. I am sure you will enjoy the experience and it is a splendid way to support our cause.

Bert Walker has already organized a gathering of Trustees to learn more about our ship and hosting visitors, and several more such events are planned before summer. Jim Reddy, Graham McBride, Pat Devenish and I spoke about “Fighting the Ship”, “Wartime Communications”, “Corvette Engineering, and the make-up of a typical Corvette Ship’s Company and there was a lively discussion about a number of topics. It was a terrific social event too, with refreshments, wartime music played on the piano, and a light lunch prepared by the ladies in Bert’s building.

## Battle of the Atlantic Concert:

We will continue the tradition of holding a Battle of the Atlantic Musical Gala, this year at the Central Library on Spring Garden Road at 2:00 p.m. Sunday 30 April, once again with the Stadacona Band and soloist Liz Rigney. The new Library is a splendid building and we hope that we will attract people who have not heard about the Battle of the Atlantic or HMCS *Sackville* previously. As the Library theatre can only accommodate 340 attendees, you will need to arrive early if you want a seat. The BOA concert is our signature event for Canada 150 and admission is waived this year.

## Battle of the Atlantic Dinner:

This year’s Dinner will be held at the CFB *Halifax* Wardroom Officers’ Mess in Juno Tower on the evening of 5 May. The cost will be about \$60 including wine, and it promises to be a splendid occasion. Those of you with service in

the military, or if you are the son or daughter of a Veteran, may consider staying overnight in Juno Towers - based on availability - for a very reasonable cost if you would prefer not to drive home after dinner. Please let the ship (902-427-2837) or me know if you wish to attend this event.

## Naval Heritage Calendar:

We have decided not to do a calendar for 2018. Although some of you have been keen supporters in the past, the reality is that sales of calendars have dropped each year. Many people with smart phones now depend upon them to organize their schedule rather than a calendar as in the past. I believe our calendars were very special, and I thank the committee who worked diligently to produce them during the past few years. Noteworthy too was the sponsorship of Peter Mielzynski Agencies, whose financial support was essential to producing a high-quality product.

## DEFSEC 2017:

We expect to be at the Cunard Centre at Pier 23 5-7 September as in past years. It may be that there will be fewer onboard meeting rooms booked as DEFSEC will have air-conditioned trailers available for rent. Nevertheless, the exposure of HMCS *Sackville* and our booth to exhibitors and visitors to DEFSEC is invaluable. We will need a few volunteers to help out as in the past.

## Volunteers needed:

As Duty Trustees and tour guides in the Summer. Help with *Action Stations* and social media (if you are interested in helping with AS or social media please contact Pat Jessup at pr@canadasnavalmemorial.ca.). Kevin Waterman, our assistant Chief Bosun’s Mate, has volunteered to help out as Gift Shop Manager. If you have any queries about how you might become involved please contact me.

*Yours aye,*

Doug Thomas (execdir@canadasnavalmemorial.ca 902-721-1206 (weekday mornings)

# Crossed the Bar



**Hilbert Arthur (Harry) Bull**, a corvette veteran of the Battle of the Atlantic and described by family as “a man of the sea and the sky” passed away in Bedford, NS Jan 28 at age 94. Following the war he served in the RCAF for 25 years, including posting to CFB Greenwood and was involved with the building and operating the Waterville airport in the Annapolis Valley. The love of flying lasted throughout his life. He was predeceased by his wife Marion, brother Gordon and sister Jo; he is survived by daughters Wendy, Gail and Shelley and a number of grand and great-grandchildren.



**Robert Hugh (Bob) Daniels**, whose naval career included service in HMC Ships *Huron*, *Buckingham* and *Swansea*, passed away in Dartmouth, NS Oct 17 at age 82. Following release from the Navy, Bob was employed by Philco Corporation maintaining radar systems at HMCS *Shearwater* and later worked at Canadian Forces air bases in Europe. In 1965 he joined Technical Marketing & Associates and rose to president, retiring from the company in 1989. He was active in a number of military support and community organizations including the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, Dartmouth Sportsplex and the Korea War Veterans Association. Survivors include his wife Anna, children Derrick and Calvin, several grandchildren and brother Bill. Donations in Bob’s name may be made to CNMT/HMCS *Sackville*.



**Commander Brian Fisher CD (ret'd)** of Bedford, NS, who was a member of the ROTP while attending Concordia University (Sir George Williams), Montreal and served in the Navy for 32 years, passed away March 4 at age 75. Survivors include his wife Margaret Rose, sons Christopher Brian

and Andrew Miles, daughter Kathleen Anne, mother Eloise, sister Sally, brother Charles and a number of grandchildren



**Clement Wilbur (Clem) Francis**, a long-time employee of Maritime Tel & Tel (later Aliant) passed away in Dartmouth, NS Nov 9 at age 83. His interests and hobbies included running, furniture making and painting. Clem was a long time Trustee whose contribution to ship is clearly evident in his skilled workmanship in furniture making. He was a follower of Canadian war artist Lawren Harris and painted many scenes of Dartmouth in his style. Clem was predeceased by his wife Mary and sister Joan; survivors include his sons Peter and John, daughter Jayne and brothers Paul and Brian.

## Lieutenant Commander Russell Freeman (ret'd),



who joined the RCN as boy seaman at 16, served at sea throughout the Second World War and following a 35 year naval career joined the Nova Scotia public service passed away in Halifax Jan 18 at age 98. During the war he served on patrol and escort duty in the North Sea, the Iceland-Faeroes-UK gap and the Murmansk Run. In 1943 he was commissioned a torpedo officer and while serving in HMCS *Haida* was Mentioned in Dispatches. In the post-war period his service included mine disposal officer West Coast, HMCS *Huron* during the Korean War and command of the minesweeper HMCS *Cordova*. He later served at National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa as director of the undersea warfare and mine countermeasures section before being seconded to the Royal Navy in Portsmouth, England. His last appointment was Commander of the First Canadian Escort Squadron, Halifax. Following his naval career he was employed with the Nova Scotia Voluntary Economic Planning Board responsible for the tourism sector. He was active in the community and pursued new skills throughout his life, including learning to fly at age 70. He was

predeceased by his wife Margaret and brother Alfred (Fred); survivors include daughters Laura and Pamela, son Kim and a number of grandchildren. Donations may be made to the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, Canadian Cancer Society or charity of choice. LCdr Freeman is pictured in front of the torpedo tubes in HMCS *Saguenay* prior to WWII.

**Warrant Officer Gerald John Gillingham MB,**



**CD,** who had a lengthy service career in the Royal Canadian Navy and was awarded the Medal of Bravery for his action during the explosion and fire aboard HMCS *Kootenay* in 1969 passed away in Halifax July 18, 2016. His citation for the MB reads in part: "WO Gillingham

organized firefighting activities and by example in dangerous situations, provided morale leadership in coping with fire and damage that resulted from an engine room explosion aboard HMCS *Kootenay*...he put on a breathing apparatus and made his way into a devastated area immediately above the engine room to shut off the "main stops" at the emergency position. Later, he exposed himself to heat and flame to operate one of the fire hoses being used near the engine room." WO Gillingham is pictured in the white shirt and cap with David Gourley surveying the engine room damage in *Kootenay*.

**Gerald Eugene (Gerry) Greer,** a life member of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust who served in the RCN 1955-1965 passed away in High River, Alberta in February 2016 at age 78. Gerry undertook new entry training at HMCS *Cornwallis* and served in HMC Ships *Haida, Lanark, Saguenay, Bonaventure, Shelburne* and at CANCOMFLT. In civilian life he was involved in the construction industry and operated his own company, Greer Contracting Ltd. In addition to CNMT, he was a life member of the Calgary Navy Vets Association, and a member of the Royal Canadian Naval Association and the Royal



Canadian Legion, High River. He is survived by his wife Gerry, daughters Carla, Kendra and Leslie and a number of grandchildren; he was predeceased by daughter Kim.

**Lieutenant Commander Allan R. Guy CD,** who served as a radar artificer during WW II and continued his naval career following the end of hostilities, passed away in Wainwright, Alberta Dec 18 at age 91. He joined HMCS *Nonsuch* as a sea cadet in 1939 and several years later enlisted in the RCN as an ordinary seaman serving out of Halifax and St John's. During his naval career he served in HMC Ships *Marvita, Lanark, New Liskeard, Portage, Wallaceburg, Ungava, Sioux* and *Sussexvale* and shore establishments HMCS *Star, Stadacona, Naden, Cornwallis* and *Niobe*, London, England. Following retirement from the RCN in 1971 he was employed as a property manager and financial adviser with Montreal Trust and later as a self-employed certified general accountant. A trustee of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, he was an active community member and past president of the RCL Edgerton Branch. He was predeceased by his wife Helen; survivors include son David, daughter Lynn and a number of grandchildren.



**Felicity Margot Hanington,** a journalist and active in the Naval Association of Canada-Vancouver Island Branch as editor of the Lead & Line newsletter passed away Oct 29 after a lengthy illness at age 60. She was the daughter of the late Rear Admiral Daniel Hanington and Margot Wallace and had a lengthy career in finance and publishing, including serving as editor of the Navy's east coast Trident newspaper and as a speech writer for former Defence Minister Perrin Beatty. Felicity was active in several community organizations including the Mustard Seed Food Bank and the St Vincent de Paul Society. Survivors include her husband Lawrence Dawe, daughter Charlotte Emily, son Matthew Lionel and siblings Gillian, Mark and Brian.



**Lieutenant Commander George A. Kearney CD,** who commenced his naval career as an ordinary seaman in 1943 and served during the Second World War and following hostilities passed away in Thunder Bay, ON Aug 17 at age 93. During the war he served as a coder in Canada, the North Atlantic and the UK in HMC Ships and shore establishments *Niobe, Leaside, Stonetown, Peregrine* and *Gloucester*. He was commissioned in 1950 through the UNTD at the University of Manitoba and served in HMCS *Ontario* (1951-52); Great Lakes Training Centre, Hamilton; and HMCS *Prestonian* (1953-54) before returning to his home division HMCS *Griffon*, Thunder Bay. In civilian life he was a high school history teacher and active in a number of military support and community organizations including the Royal Canadian Legion (Meritorious Service Medal 2009), Naval Officers Association of Canada, the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, Royal Canadian Naval Association, Gyro Club and the Thunder Bay Historical Museum. Survivors include his wife Vera, children George, Geoffrey and Joel, and a number of grandchildren.



**Harry J. McEwan,** a veteran of WWII who served with the RCN in the Atlantic and Pacific theatres of operations passed away in Chatham, ON in November 2015 in his 93rd year. He was a financial consultant for Investors Group for 42 years, a Life Member of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust and active in the community, including past president of the Clinton Kinsmen Club and Chatham Minor Hockey Association and a member of the Clinton Masonic Lodge, Chatham Lodge of Perfection, Kent Chapter Rose Croix, Mocha Temple and Ahcom Shrine Club. His wife Elva passed away Dec 28, 2016 in her 90th year. Survivors include sons Rolfe, Clare and Brett and a number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



**Major Hugh F.H. Pullen CD,** whose military career included service in several regiments and with the UN Multinational Force and Observers Peacekeeping Mission in Egypt, passed away in Halifax Sept 6, 2016. He was born 1934, son of the late Rear Admiral Hugh F. Pullen and Helen Pullen. He was a graduate of the Royal Military College (1956) (pictured) and served in the Royal 22nd Regiment, the Black Watch and the Royal Canadian Regiment along with an exchange posting to the British Army School of Infantry. Following retirement from army in 1980 he served as administrator for the Law Courts Commission and was active in heritage and development and other community activities. He is survived by his wife Gillian, children Nicholas and Lucy, siblings Tinker, Sarah, Margo, Frances, Helen and William and several grandchildren.

**Peter John Melkert,** active in a number of community organizations and a strong supporter of veterans passed away in Halifax in February at age 87. He was born in Holland, immigrated to Canada in 1952 and was involved in the automotive industry for a number of years including operating Melkert Motors. Early in his career he served in the Militia and later became an Auxiliary RCMP constable as an interpreter and involved in emergency measures operations. He was a member of Canadian Martyrs/St Thomas Aquinas Church, Royal Canadian Legion including chair of the Halifax Central Poppy Committee, Walter Callow Wheelchair Bus and the Atlantic Swells Barbershop Chorus. Among his community service awards was the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award. He was predeceased by his partner Eva; survivors include his daughter Anita; sons Danny, Ricky, Peter and Demetrius; a number of grandchildren and his partner's children John and Maria.



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**John Thomas (Sam) Shimansky**, who was serving in HMCS *Kootenay* at the time of the explosion and fire in the destroyer in 1969, passed away in Welland, Ontario Dec 4 at age 70. John volunteered for the Southend Neighbourhood Committee coaching children's coed baseball for many years. What was most important

to John was family and he always prayed to the Angels to watch over his children. Survivors include his wife Victoria, children Vanessa, Annabel, Asia, Brodie, Jessica and Lauren, a number of grandchildren and extended family members.

**Christina Stringer**, widow of Petty Officer Lewis Stringer, CV, passed away in Antigonish at age 92. As a young woman Christina was employed with Simpson Sears in Antigonish and Halifax. She lived in Dartmouth but returned to Antigonish with her daughters after the untimely death of her husband as a result of a gearbox explosion in HMCS *Kootenay* in 1969. PO Stringer was awarded the Cross of Valour posthumously for performance of an act "...of the most conspicuous courage." The CV and two other decorations for bravery were created in 1972. Her survivors include daughters Louise, Susan and Jacqueline, sisters Ruth, Frances, Jean, Florence and Anne, brothers Jackie, Colin and Carroll and several grandchildren.

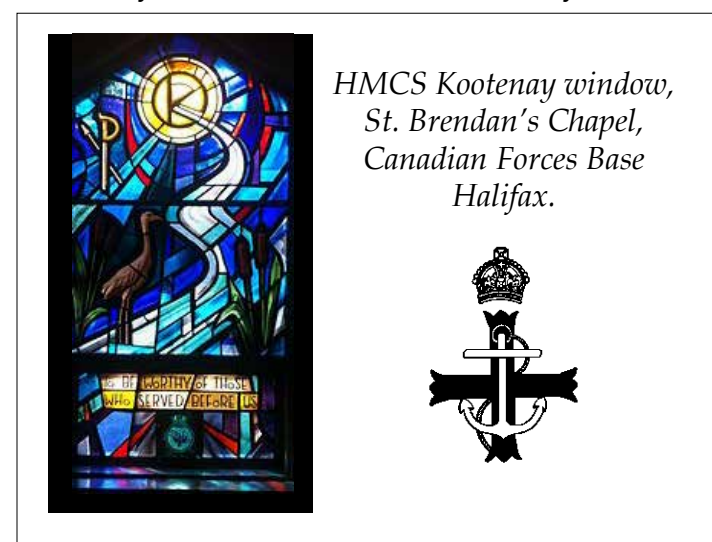
**Douglas Arthur Taylor**, son of the late Herman and Agnes Taylor of Kentville passed away February 21, 2017 at the age of 79. Joining in 1954, Doug served 21 years in the Canadian military as a cook. He was serving in HMCS *Kootenay* when the ship's gearbox exploded in 1969. He did three tours in Germany and two in Cyprus, retiring as head chef in Camp Aldershot. He is survived by his sons, David (May), Doug

(Rosie), and sisters Phyllis (Ed), Audrey (Neil), brother Robert (Linda) and several grand and great grandchildren. He was predeceased by his wife Joan.

**Chief Petty Officer Lawrence (Larry) Uwins** of Halifax, who joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1953 and served to 1986 passed away in Halifax March 20, 2016 at age 80. Prior to his release he was stationed at CFB Halifax where he served in the officers messes. Following retirement he served as civilian bar manager for C&POs

messes. He is survived by his wife Olga, daughter Jennifer, son Timothy, several grandchildren, brothers and sisters-in-law Walter Chaban and Orest and Carolyn Chaban; he was predeceased by brother William and sister Mildred.

**Joseph Robert (Harry) Watson**, a 29 year Navy veteran who served in HMCS *Kootenay* during the tragic explosion in the ship in 1969 passed away Feb 3 in Dartmouth, NS at age 74. He later was employed with Halifax Shipyard for 15 years. He is survived by his wife Diane, sons Richard, Rob and John; daughter Diane, brother Pete, sister Rene and a number of grandchildren; he was predeceased by brother Don and sisters Mary and Jean.



HMCS *Kootenay* window, St. Brendan's Chapel, Canadian Forces Base Halifax.



## Interrupted Voyage

by Carl Anderson

On 3 September 1939 a German torpedo sank the Donaldson Line trans-Atlantic steamship SS *Athenia* off the coast of Northern Ireland and opened the Battle of the Atlantic of the Second World War. Fourteen-year-old Don Wilcox and his mother Dorothy were homeward bound for Canada aboard the *Athenia* and survived the sinking along with 1,306 other passengers and crew. In the year 2000 Don wrote a memoir of his experience. This is the conclusion of Don's story, based on his memoir, his personal papers, and Alfred Draper's book *Operation Fish: The Race to Save Europe's Wealth* (Cassell, 1979).

### Part 2- Second Time Lucky

Two weeks after the *Athenia* sinking, Britain instituted convoying of merchant vessels in the Atlantic. Dorothy Wilcox, shaken by the *Athenia* experience, was unwilling to set out immediately on a second Atlantic crossing to Canada. Instead, she and Don returned to her family in Wales where they had spent the summer. They took an apartment in Cardiff and Don enrolled in the Monkton House School. He wrote in his memoir, "We were both issued with identity cards and gas masks which we, and everyone else, always had to carry. I cycled back and forth about three miles to school and even the headlight on my bicycle was blacked out except for a half inch strip across the center."

That fall Europe entered a lull in naval and military warfare, the "Phoney War", which was to

Dorothy Wilcox and her son Don among other survivors rescued by the Norwegian freighter *Knute Nelson* arriving in Wales, 3 September, 1939. Don is the young lad looking directly into the camera in front of the ventilator trunk. His mother is on his right.

last until the spring of 1940. Economic warfare intensified, however. As an island nation Britain imported raw materials, food, fuel, machinery, and manufactured goods from around the world, and she depended on export trade to pay for those commodities. She now sought to secure those vital supplies through trade agreements with neutral states. At the same time she moved to deny these same materials to Germany with a naval blockade.

The United States was by far Britain's most important trading partner, but the U.S. Neutrality Act of 1939 prohibited U.S. sales of war materiel to belligerent states except on a cash-and-carry basis.

Germany's invasion of neutral Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940 abruptly ended the Phoney War. The following day Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as British Prime Minister. Dorothy and Don were by then living with her parents in Cardiff. Dorothy believed that if she and Don could not soon find passage to Canada, they might be stranded in Wales indefinitely.

On 16 April Dorothy's brother-in-law A.C.B. Pickford visited Canada House in London. He sought the Canadian Government's help in getting the Wilcoxes home, but an official informed him that no funds were available to repatriate Canadian survivors of the *Athenia* sinking. The

Canadian representative told Pickford, however, that CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) ships were still sailing almost weekly from Liverpool to Montreal in convoy under Admiralty orders. His opinion was that although no guarantees could be given, the risk at that time was "almost negligible". Pickford was advised to contact the Canadian Trade Commissioner in Glasgow, who was responsible for the return of Canadian *Athenia* survivors.

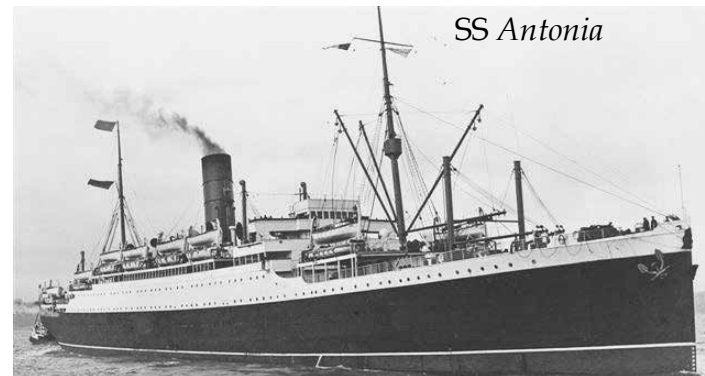
Pickford was also told that although no settlement for the Wilcoxes' loss was available from *Athenia's* owners, a claim could be lodged by survivors against eventual war reparations. Dorothy therefore wrote to the Board of Trade in London to lodge a claim against the German Government for her and Don's "complete loss of personal effects" in the *Athenia* disaster. She claimed a sum of £175.10.0d, which today would be worth about \$9,000.

The Canadian Government in London had granted the Wilcoxs funds for immediate needs after their rescue, and the Donaldson Line had refunded three-quarters of the fare for their interrupted *Athenia* voyage. By the spring of 1940, however, Dorothy had spent all these funds (about \$1,800 today) on living expenses in Cardiff. As a result, she did not have enough money to return to Canada.

Pickford wrote immediately to the Canadian Trade Commissioner in Glasgow who informed the Donaldson Line of the Wilcox's plight. Within days the Trade Commissioner responded that the Donaldson Line was consulting with the Cunard-White Star Line to find passage for the Wilcoxes. On 22 April word came that berths were available in mid-June aboard a Cunard-White Star liner for the price of their earlier interrupted voyage. Dorothy had only to return the refund of £27 (about \$1,400 today) that she had received from the Donaldson Line. This was welcome news to her and Don because due to the worsening war situation, trans-Atlantic steamship fares had nearly doubled since the previous summer. Dorothy's refund from the Donaldson Line, however, had been spent long before. Pickford therefore diplomatically asked the Trade Commissioner if he could help. This he did by providing just over half the sum requested by the Donaldson Line.

Dorothy gratefully accepted the offered Cunard-White Star booking but requested a May sailing date and assurance that she and Don would share a cabin.

Don wrote in his memoir, "We remained in Cardiff until May when we were advised that the last available berths to Canada were on the *Antonia* sailing on May 30th from Liverpool. Mother decided that we should return, so we accepted the berths and were told to board during the morning of the 30th."



For the second time Dorothy and Don left Cardiff by train for Liverpool. "We left Cardiff," Don wrote "on the afternoon of May 29th for yet another overnight train trip to Liverpool. For the past few days the news from France was very gloomy with reports of the German advances everywhere. The train was again packed with soldiers and there were very few civilians traveling, as passes were required to obtain tickets other than for local travel. We joined the *Antonia* without incident and were just in time for a boat drill. After the boat drill we received a long lecture about the black-out onboard, the restrictions about being on deck at night and throwing anything overboard. We were informed that there would be two boat drills a day for the entire voyage. We were then assigned our cabins and our dining-room reservations."

On the evening of 30 May 1940 convoy OB-158 departed Liverpool, its twenty-nine merchant ships laden with general cargo and coal destined for a wide assortment of foreign ports. Departing Liverpool at the same time was the 13,900 tonne Cunard-White Star liner *Antonia*. "We sailed from Liverpool at 2000 in a very large convoy, with ships in every direction as far as one could see." The thought of sailing in a large convoy with its naval escorts must have been a comfort

to Dorothy and Don, who remembered all too well *Athenia's* lone passage through these waters nine months earlier. The security of sailing in a large convoy was not to be, however. Instead, *Antonia* proceeded independently out of the Irish Sea via North Channel and into the North Atlantic. In the night she passed within a few miles of the sunken wrecks of both torpedoed *Athenia* steamships, the first being *SS Athenia* August 1917.

"Deck restrictions were imposed about 21:00 hours and when we are allowed on deck the next morning we saw only two ships, another passenger ship and a very large warship," Don wrote later. Under cover of darkness *Antonia* had joined a nameless westbound convoy northwest of Ireland. Don had no way of knowing that the scene spread out before him was in fact part of a secret operation known as "Fish", whose objective was to evacuate Britain's wealth to Canada. Beneath Don's feet, deep in *Antonia's* hold, lay £10 million in gold bullion.

Operation Fish originated with Britain's need for funds to be available in North America to purchase war materials under the cash-and-carry provisions of the U.S. Neutrality Act. To provide the cash, gold bullion had to be transferred from the Bank of England in London to the Bank of Canada in Ottawa. The first such transfer was in May 1939 when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, embarking on a state visit to Canada and the United States, sailed in *RMS Empress of Australia* to Québec. Two escorting Royal Navy cruisers, *HMS Southampton* and *Glasgow*, each secretly carried £15 million in gold bullion destined for the Bank of Canada. After the declaration of war in September 1939 gold transfers proceeded at an increasing pace. By the end of April 1940 a further £96 million in gold had been transported in British warships to Halifax for rail shipment to Ottawa.

Germany's invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France soon after her occupation of Norway and Denmark made clear Hitler's intention to subjugate all Western Europe. On 13 May 1940 the Royal Navy evacuated the Dutch royal family and the Dutch government's gold from the Netherlands to the UK. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was determined to

put Britain's wealth beyond the enemy's grasp, and to that end the British government quickly passed legislation giving it full powers over all persons and property, including British gold, negotiable securities, and bank notes.

On 25 May 1940 the War Cabinet adopted a plan to immediately accelerate British gold shipments to Canada. The battleship *HMS Revenge* together with the fast troopships *Antonia* and *Duchess of Liverpool* were ordered to carry £60 million in gold bullion to Halifax, Nova Scotia, for transport by special trains to Ottawa.



King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on the steps of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa during the royal visit in 1939. His Majesty was the first reigning British monarch to visit Canada.

It therefore transpired that the Wilcoxs' ship *Antonia* joined company in the early hours of 30 May with *HMS Revenge* and the fast liner *Duchess of Richmond*, which had replaced the *Duchess of Liverpool*. They had been escorted from Greenock, Scotland, to the rendezvous point by four W-Class destroyers. After the destroyers detached, the un-named convoy of three gold ships steamed at full speed for Halifax. *HMS Revenge*, with £40 million stowed in an ammunition magazine, was on her third such voyage.

Don recalled that "It was obvious from the vibration that the *Antonia* was being pushed to her limit so we looked forward to a speedy passage. However, due to zig-zagging to avoid the German submarines, the voyage to Canada took nine days at top speed. At one stage of the voyage, we



HMS *Revenge*

seemed to be going far to the north as the weather turned very cold and the sun set very late. A few days later we seemed to be quite far south as it turned very warm and the sun set much earlier with very little twilight.

“A news bulletin was posted every day so we were able to keep up with the situation in France. About three days out, we learned about the army being forced to fall back on Dunkirk and followed the details of the Dunkirk evacuation through the bulletins posted by the Wireless Office. The successful evacuation of the troops from Dunkirk raised the morale of everyone, especially the crew of the *Antonia*.”

“Our stop in Halifax was unexpected as we were due to disembark in Montreal. However, nobody was allowed ashore and the reason for the Halifax call soon became obvious when we tied up at Pier 21 just ahead of the *Duchess [of Richmond]* and started to unload some cargo.” *Antonia*’s decks were closed to passengers while the ship was docked, but 16-year-old Don couldn’t resist the temptation to look over the ship’s side. “The cargo being unloaded consisted of pallet after pallet of small wooden boxes... We could see similar boxes being unloaded from the [*Duchess of Richmond*]. *HMS Revenge* had tied up in the navy dockyard.”

With the discharge of her mysterious cargo completed, *Antonia* departed Halifax. “We sailed from Halifax later that afternoon for Montreal. The next day we were in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and picked up our pilot near Rimouski. That evening, we were allowed on deck for the first

time even though a full blackout of the ship was still in force. The lights of the towns along the river really looked wonderful after nearly a year of total blackout in England. We docked in Montreal early on the morning of June 11 and dad was waiting for us on the pier.” Don and Dorothy Wilcox were home.

### Epilogue

In June 1940 the British Ministry of Shipping granted Dorothy Wilcox £125 ex gratia for her and Don’s loss of personal effects in the *Athenia* sinking. The Ministry’s official position was, however, that it had no legal obligation to do so because the loss was due to an act of war.

*HMS Revenge* made two further voyages in 1940 transporting gold to Halifax. Her grand total of £113.5 million in gold bullion accounted for one-quarter of all shipments of British gold in Operation Fish. Not one gold bar was lost crossing the North Atlantic.

Don’s experience in *Athenia*’s lifeboat on the night of 3 September 1939 sparked a lifelong interest in boats and navigation, and he became a yachtsman in later life. He mastered the art of celestial navigation and taught it to other sailors, one of whom used that skill to navigate alone under sail across the Atlantic. Don Wilcox passed away in 2013.



Don was an enthusiastic volunteer onboard HMCS *Sackville* who could put his hand to anything at a moment’s notice.

## Promoting Navy Heritage in Halifax: HMCS *Sackville*

by Peter Stoffer



Canada’s Naval Memorial, the K181 corvette by the name of HMCS *Sackville*, has her berth in the historic garrison city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is the last of those tremendous vessels that protected the shipping lanes and convoys in the North Atlantic during the Second World War.

Years ago this ship was to be scrapped and, if it was not for the vision and determination of some very capable people, she would have been lost to the history books. Today, over 1,000 people from across Canada have become trustees of the *Sackville* and work very hard to not only keep her in tip top shape, but also ensure future generations have the opportunity to visit and learn about Canada’s naval history.

Along with the cooperation of the Department of National Defence [our good friends in the Royal Canadian Navy], HMCS *Sackville* remains a beacon of dignity and respect for all those who served and gave their lives in the fight for freedom.

Which brings me to the subject of the Battle of the Atlantic Place. This extraordinary vision to permanently house Canada’s Naval Memorial in a stunning iconic building in Halifax, will be a truly outstanding tribute to all the men and women who served abroad and here at home. The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest battle

during the Second World War, lasting from 1939 to 1945. Many historians, prime ministers of the day and others have stated that if it was not for the sea lanes being open to allow the many convoys to go from Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador to Great Britain, the war would have been lost. Getting those men and material to Europe was essential to have a successful conclusion to the war.

Battle of the Atlantic Place will be a dramatic architectural presence in a prime location on Halifax’s waterfront. Personally, I believe it will be to Canada what the Sydney Opera house is to Australia. Visible from and around the harbour, and with extensive harbour views, Battle of the Atlantic Place will deliver an innovative, immersive, story-driven and emotional journey for guests who will themselves become part of the story. This is not just a Nova Scotia or East Coast story. This was national historic Canadian event that changed Canada forever.

All Canadians--and for that matter the world--need to not only remember what a nation of 11 million was able to do, but also pay homage to all those who willingly gave up their lives so that we, today, may all be free.

As a Dutch-born Canadian whose parents were liberated by Canada and her Allies during the Second World War, I am very proud and honoured to be a trustee of HMCS *Sackville*. I encourage all Canadians to get behind this magnificent project so that future generations can honour and pay respect to those heroes of the past. To get involved or for further information, please can contact:

[www.battleoftheatlanticplace.ca](http://www.battleoftheatlanticplace.ca)

*Peter Stoffer represented the federal riding of Sackville-Eastern Shore for 18 years. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, which owns and operates HMCS Sackville, Canada’s Naval Memorial.*

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## RCNBF - 74 years Old and still Serving

by CPO1 (Ret'd) Tom Eustace, Director RCN Benevolent Fund

October marked the 74th Anniversary of the Royal Canadian Naval Benevolent Fund (RCNBF), who continue their long service of helping sailors in need. Although much has changed for the Fund over those years, including the name of the organization, the scope of the service provided and the criteria for assistance eligibility; the RCNBF remains an important Navy resource. What hasn't changed is their Mission, "to relieve distress and promote the well-being of our sailors and former members of the Naval Forces of Canada and their dependents". Today, the RCNBF does this mainly through distress relief in the form of financial advice, grants or interest free loans, and education assistance through bursaries and scholarships.

The Navy's Benevolent Fund was established in 1942, after Admirals and CPOs of the day had identified a lack of financial resources available for families of RCN sailors who suffered unexpected difficulties while ships were deployed for long periods of time. Their dream came together 23 November 1942 when an Order in Council was passed for the creation of the RCNBF.

Initial funds were comprised of undistributed prize money from WWI together with contributions from canteens and Naval Messes. The Fund was administered by Naval Officers and Officials serving at the Naval Headquarters. Years later, the Fund was incorporated as a not-for-profit charity under the Corporations Act and the funding continued to come from canteen levies in ship's Messes and monthly pay allotments from sailors.

After unification in 1968, the RCNBF was able to continue its service and by the mid 70's, the Fund had done well financially by investing wisely in

Canadian Bonds. Today, the Fund is professionally managed, and has grown beyond expectation and instead of fading away due to reduced applications for assistance, we have expanded our client-base and programs to include the awarding of education scholarships to the children and grandchildren of former and serving sailors and to Sea Cadets.

The Fund is administered independently of DND/CAF under the governance of a 12-member Board of Directors, who are voted in every year, and three supporting regional committees comprised of dedicated, former sailors that are located in Esquimalt, Ottawa and Halifax. The committees meet when required and provide advice

to the Board and adjudicate requests for assistance. Over the life of the Fund, it has provided assistance in various forms, to more than 24,000 individuals, with the dollar amount that has surpassed \$17 million.

Eligibility for RCNBF assistance has expanded from being open only to pre-unification RCN members to now include Merchant Navy Veterans and former and serving, post-unification RCN members. The Fund also provides consideration to Canadian Army and RCAF members, including Reservists, who have served in operational units of Maritime Command. At a recent Annual General Meeting, the Fund took on the "One Navy" approach, and now provide assistance eligibility to Naval Reservists who have completed their basic training. Naval Reservists now enjoy the same eligibility requirements as Regular Force Sailors.

Some of the common urgent issues that fall under "distress relief" include requiring the basic necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter) to emergency home repairs, fire damage, dental work, and medical devices, among numerous other rea-



sons. Minor disbursements of up to \$1000, which can be approved on short notice, are also offered in emergency cases of "dire need".

As the number of requests for distress relief have waned recently, the downturn has enabled the Fund to provide education assistance to former members and their dependents seeking to further their education at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Education assistance is another aspect of what the Fund can do for our sailors. The RCNBF administers two bursaries under its own name, including one bursary that focuses on trades/vocational studies and two others, the CPO Douglas R. Hooser and the CPO Andrew McQueen Jack Bursaries. The Fund partners with the Navy League of Canada and the Canadian Sea Cadet Scholarships, awarding a number of \$1000 scholarships per year to cadets entering their initial year of college or university.

The Fund is presently undergoing changes to improve administrative efficiencies and cut operating costs. A reduction in members, directors and employees through attrition without replacement, is underway in order to be a more "lean" organization. With downsizing and a move of the Ottawa office to a smaller and less expensive location completed, the Fund has now closed the Western and Eastern Committee offices which will now be run as "virtual coastal offices" operating with volunteers. With these recent changes now in place, the Fund believes it can continue to provide assistance to sailors well into the future while working closely with other agencies such as the Integrated Personnel Support Centers, Military Family Resource Centers, and of course, the Divisional System, in order to better assist our Veterans, their dependents and our serving members.

Applications for distress relief assistance made by eligible veterans or their dependents should be made through either the Department of Veterans Affairs, any Royal Canadian Legion or Vets Canada. Service Officers in any of the Veteran Organizations, including the Chiefs and Petty Officers Association, RCNA, etc. can provide guidance with the application and forward the completed documentation along with recommendations to the Fund. Serving members ap-

plying for distress relief or loans through the RCNBF should do so through their Divisional System where applications will be forwarded to the appropriate Fund Committee. For more information on the RCNBF application for assistance process as well as bursary and scholarship application guidelines; or for any questions, the Fund's Secretary/Treasurer will be pleased to assist by email at [rcnbf@rcnbf.com](mailto:rcnbf@rcnbf.com) or by phone at 613-236-4528 or toll free at 1-888-557-8777 or on line at [www.RCNBF.ca](http://www.RCNBF.ca).

As a registered charity, the RCNBF provides unmatched transparency and accountability to all our donors by publishing reports on how we use donations and we rely on serving and retired members like you, to continue our support to sailors and their families. If you are interested in donating to the Fund, you are encouraged to do so through a payroll deduction or via the RCNBF Website or by mail. An official receipt for donations will be issued for income tax purposes. If you are aware of or know anyone who is in financial difficulty, that may be eligible for assistance, remember the RCNBF remains "Ready, Aye Ready".

The RCNBF mandate is to promote the well-being of current and former members of the Naval Forces of Canada and their dependants. The Secretary Treasurer of the RCNBF will be pleased to supply any additional information required, by writing or calling:

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6 Beechwood Avenue, Suite 9  
Ottawa, Ontario  
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Fax: (613)236-8830  
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## RCAF Involvement in the Battle of the Atlantic

### Turning the Tide by LCol ret'd Mike Black and LCol ret'd Bart Konings

#### Part 1

By mid-1942, the Allied air support effort by Eastern Air Command on the Canadian East Coast and Coastal Command on the British side had been successful in causing the German U-boats to withdraw from these coastal areas and move to the mid-Atlantic Gap, an area south of Iceland that could not be reached by RCAF or RAF aircraft to provide air cover for the convoys transiting through this area. As well, the United States had started to react to the mayhem that the U-boats had brought to their coast during Operation "Paukenschlag" (Drumbeat) by increasing their air patrols, adopting a convoy system and placing blackout conditions on the coastal communities.

Only 120 Squadron of RAF Coastal Command, operating B24s out of Iceland, had sufficient range and endurance for convoy

support operations in the Gap. However, with a limited number of aircraft available and operating in an area with renowned bad weather flying conditions, they could not provide the air support to prevent the significant loss of shipping during the remainder of 1942. This loss had a significant impact on the buildup of supplies and material in England and the timing for the invasion of Europe.

As previous articles have illustrated, RCAF Squadrons were operating from bases in Newfoundland, Ireland and Scotland in an attempt to combat the losses occurring in the mid-Atlantic Gap. The Canso, Catalina (PBV) and Short Sunderland aircraft Flying Boats used by the RCAF were beginning to be successful in providing

some air support to the North Atlantic convoys. Efforts by the RCAF in reducing the weight of the Canso gave it the longest effective range of any PBV flying boat or amphibian then flying but they were not capable of providing coverage within the Gap. Toward the end of 1942 and early 1943, the number of U-boats sent on Operational Patrols to the Eastern Seaboard and to the Canadian area of responsibility were few. Nearly one half of the operational U-boat fleet were operating in the Gap, also known as "Torpedo Junction."

The worst North Atlantic shipping losses to U-boats occurred in 1942 and early 1943. This was a result of the U-boats employing Wolf Pack Tactics, which consisted of establishing a patrol line of U-boats across the anticipated convoy track and upon contact having them converge on the merchant ships. The advantage was with the U-boats, as they had accurate knowledge of convoy movements as a

result of the Germans having broken the Allied Naval Code and there was insufficient air support to attack or disrupt their operation.

Notwithstanding the inability to adequately provide air support in the Gap, a number of significant Allied operational capabilities were coming into effect. These included the use of coverage tactics and Leigh Lights by aircraft in the Bay of Biscay operation, which made it more difficult during both day and night for the U-boats to transit between French bases and their Patrol Areas in or near the Gap. Also the HF/DF (High Frequency/Direction Finding) capability from ships, aircraft and shore stations, and the availability of Ultra Intelligence all provided advantages to the Allies in countering U-boat attacks.



Missing in the equation was the availability of longrange aircraft to provide continuous coverage to the convoys transiting the mid-Atlantic.

While a modified Liberator aircraft could operate anywhere in the Atlantic to provide Anti-Submarine support, senior British Commanders would not release any from Bomber Command as the major strategic Allied air war effort was devoted to bomber operations and the destruction of war production and civilian targets in Germany. However, they did reluctantly agree to use these aircraft as part of their strategic bombing strategy to destroy U-boat bases in France, on the assumption that this operation would negate the need to provide long-range air cover over the Atlantic.

RAF Bomber Command was directed to bomb the submarine bases in France. During the first five months in 1943, 7,000 sorties were flown, delivering 18,000 tons of explosive at a cost of 266 aircraft and crews which obliterated the countryside around the submarine pens without damaging a single U-boat or impacting their operations.

Although discussions on using Liberator aircraft for Canadian maritime operations had reached senior political levels, the Canadian government had no success convincing RAF and USAF commanders that the RCAF had become a force to be reckoned with in combating German operations in the Atlantic. Despite the understanding by the Allies that winning the Battle of the Atlantic was critical to the survival of England and the invasion of Europe, providing capable aircraft for the Battle of the Atlantic continued to be an issue with the British and a problem for American forces due to the lack of a coordinated approach and command structure by the USN and the USAAF.

As reported by WAB Douglas in his book, *Canada's Official Air Force History*, "both RAF and USAAF observers also doubted the effectiveness of RCAF performance in the Western Atlantic". They would be proven wrong.

#### Part 2

At the Casablanca Conference between Britain and the US in January of 1943, top priority was given by Roosevelt and Churchill to winning the

Battle of the Atlantic, spurred on by the fact that the total tonnage of merchant ships sunk in the latter part of 1942 had risen above the 800,000 tons mark - of which 500,000 tons were in the Atlantic. This was directly impacting the buildup for "Overlord", the invasion of Europe. As a result of the discussions at the conference, the US committed several USAAF B24 Squadrons to Coastal Command for operations in the Bay of Biscay, but also released B24 VLR (Very Long Range) aircraft for ASW operations to the RAF and RCAF.



President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill deep in discussion at the Casablanca Conference January 24, 1943.

The concept of a unified Command was discussed but neither the USN, nor the RAF or the RCAF, was ready to enter into such an agreement. However, Britain and Canada were given the exclusive responsibility for the North Atlantic routes while the USA assumed exclusive responsibility of the South Atlantic.

At the beginning of 1943, the order of battle for Eastern Air Command consisted of nine Bomber Recce (BR/ASW) Squadrons, six Fighter Squadrons and one Utility (Transport) Squadron. The BR Squadrons operated from East Coast airfields and Gander. They had a combined strength of 125 Aircraft, which included Hudson IIIs, Digbys and Catalina/ Canso amphibians. As a result of the Casablanca decisions, No. 10 Squadron operating out of Dartmouth received 24 Consolidated Liberators Mk III, V and G.R Mk VI aircraft for operations and deployed to Gander starting operations in May of 1943. No. 11 Squadron, also out of Dartmouth, received 24 Consolidated

Liberators Mk III,V and G.R Mk VI aircraft and deployed to Argentia, starting operations in July of 1943. Canadian VLR Aircraft acquired trans-Atlantic capability in July of 1943.

The impact of providing long range air-support to the convoys as well as other newly developed operational capabilities and intelligence allowed the Allied forces to gain the upper hand in the U-boat war. Although U-boats continued to have great success during the first four months of 1943, due in part of a lack of Ultra information caused by a change in the Enigma machine, they incurred significant losses in May of that year. VLR operations in the Gap, USN CVE (Carrier) Operations in the South Atlantic and a concentrated effort in the Bay of Biscay aimed at disrupting the transit corridor also contributed to increased U-boat losses and a resultant decrease in shipping losses. Because of the increased air support and near real-time intelligence, the number of U-boat sightings increased dramatically. The sightings had a direct correlation to the decreased number of attacks that could be carried out by the U-boats.

As a result of significant losses in May of 1943, the U-boats were withdrawn from the Gap area for several months. The Germans had used a statistic for their success based on the ratio of shipping tonnage sunk to U-boat losses - termed the exchange rate. This rate had dropped precipitously from 100,000 tons per U-boat lost when the U-boats were making a significant impact, to about 10,000 tons per U-boat lost from June 1943 onward.

The breaking by Bletchley of the new Enigma machine five-rotor code in May of 1943, allowed German instructions to the U-boat captains to be translated in near real-time. This amazing feat allowed Allied Forces in the Atlantic to get the upper hand by intercepting U-boat wireless traffic during their transit to convoy locations. The intelligence information from the positions of the U-boat patrol lines, the rerouting of the convoys around the lines and the ability of the Allies to provide adequate Long Range air support coverage significantly decreased merchant shipping losses

In September 1943, U-boats were ordered to return for a final go at the North Atlantic Convoys. Patrol Line "Leuthen", consisting of 21 U-boats, was set up west of Ireland to intercept Convoys ONS18 and ON202. Bletchley Park Intelligence analysts were aware of the order to set up a patrol line, but did not know the end positions so evasive action by the convoys was limited. Liberators from No 86 Squadron RAF and 10 Squadron RCAF were sent as air escorts and Liberator 586A of 10 Squadron RCAF flown by F/L Fisher and crew sank U341.

To reach the convoys the U-boats had been ordered to surface and fight their way to the convoy against the ever-present air and surface escorts, and while somewhat successful in driving the aircraft off with their AA guns, were not very successful in these suicidal types of operations.



*German submarine U-175 sinking after gunfire attack by US Coast Guard Cutter Spencer, 17 April 1943. The U-boat was caught trying to sneak into the centre of a convoy. CCG photographer: Jack January*

Another patrol line, "Rossbach", consisting of 21 U-boats was established on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September to operate against convoy ON203. The pack failed to find the convoy as the convoy was diverted to the north of the patrol line. Air resources directed at the U-boat group were responsible for damaging or sinking 8 submarines. Later in October Group "Siegfried" was established, consisting of 24 U-boats. It had a fate similar to "Rossbach" with the loss of a significant number of U-boats without a single loss of any shipping. RCAF resources from 10 Squadron were active in these latter operations.

While the Allies were successful in decoding Enigma signals, post-war analysis indicated that

the Germans were very successful in decoding our naval codes. Despite the fact that the Allies were reading Enigma traffic, the Germans continued to believe that their codes were secure based on the fact that they had broken the Allied Cypher 3 code early in the war which allowed them to determine the exact positions of the convoys. They also attributed the ability of the Allies to locate their U-boats to the accuracy of HF/DF and an inflated perception of the capability of Allied airborne radar. That the Germans were reading Cypher 3 information was not recognized by the Allies until June of 1943 when it was replaced by Cypher 5 which remained secure until the end of the war.



*HMCS Sackville's radar housed directly forward and above the funnel.*

The effectiveness of increased air support and the resultant damage and sinking of enemy submarines eventually resulted in the withdrawal of the U-boat fleet from the Gap and the North Atlantic in mid-1943. This permitted RCAF resources such as 162 Squadron to be deployed overseas in 1944 to support "Overlord".

Allied anti-submarine forces were able to "turn the tide" of the Battle of the Atlantic because of better intelligence, technological development, improved crew training and ASW tactics, improved air/sea cooperation, and the ability of North American shipyards to build merchant ships and convoy escorts more rapidly than the enemy could sink them.

Another one of the technical breakthroughs for the Allies was the development of 10 cm radar which was installed on ships and aircraft. Although the Germans could detect the previous versions of the ASV radar, they could not de-

tect the 10 cm version, nor did their scientists conceive that this could be done. This allowed Allied aircraft to detect U-boats at night as well as daylight and especially when the boats were surfaced. U-boats had to be on the surface when transiting to their operational area: the type VII submarine could achieve 17 knots on the surface but only 6 knots submerged. During the latter part of 1943, U-boats were being fitted with snorkels which allowed them to charge their batteries while partially submerged and running on their diesel engines at greater speeds. However, the large diameter of the snorkel pipe and the resultant exhaust plume of the diesel engine helped in locating the submarine both visually and electronically.

It is difficult to understand the failure of the German Navy to understand the need for technological and tactical improvements. Operational research by the Allies, which became an integral part of ASW operations, was not adopted by the Germans until late in the war when it was too late. They failed to develop counter measures against 10 cm radar even though they had a working piece of captured equipment. The German Navy made great strides in modular construction and propulsion and were developing greatly improved U-boats; if these new submarines had been available in 1943 rather than late in 1944, it would have made a big difference in the North Atlantic. The Type XXI U-boat was faster submerged than most Allied convoy escorts.

Allied air force ASW tactics also improved by using higher patrol altitudes, different aircraft paint schemes and most important, improved cooperation between Naval and Air Force operation centres. Although the RAF and RN learned to work together from the beginning of the war by having joint operation centres, the RCAF and RCN did not adopt these centres until midway through. Joint Air and Naval Operation Centres are still serving Maritime Forces today.

The success of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was certainly a major factor in helping to win the Battle of the Atlantic. By 1943, Canada had seven Maritime Patrol Squadrons in Canada, four in Newfoundland and three squad-

rons attached to RAF Coastal Command. In addition, nearly ten percent of RAF Coastal crews were Canadians. These numbers do not include aircrew provided to Bomber Command or aircrew trained for other countries.

By the end of the war, RCAF Squadrons had sunk 20 German submarines and Canadian aircrew flying with Coastal Command, like Flying Officer KO Moore (RCAF) pictured below on the right, who sank two U-boats, U629 and U373 on June 8, 1944, were involved in the sinking of fifty others.

The contribution of Maritime Patrol Aircraft to



winning the Battle of the Atlantic cannot be over-emphasized. According to David White in his book, *Bitter Ocean, the Battle of the Atlantic*, "More than half the U-boat kills in the Battle of the Atlantic were scored by aircraft". These totals do not include the number of times enemy submarines had to submerge to avoid being detected by aircraft and thus prevented from reaching their convoy target.

The cost in human life in this battle was also high. Approximately 1600 Canadian merchant seamen died at sea including eight women. Some 2,000 RCN members were killed, most of them in this battle. Another 752 RCAF members died in Maritime operations.

While the Battle of the Atlantic did not officially end until VE Day, the Allied invasion of Europe could not have occurred without this battle being decisively won by Allied Naval and Air Forces in 1943.



### Combat Action in the North Atlantic: USCGC Spencer vs. the U-175

On 17 April 1943, USCGC *Spencer*, one of the Coast Guard's largest cutters of the time, was escorting Convoy HX-233 across the North Atlantic to the United Kingdom. While steaming ahead of the convoy the cutter's sonarman, Harold Anderson, detected the submerged U-175 as the submarine maneuvered to attack a large tanker within the convoy. *Spencer* immediately dropped depth charges on the target. The charges bracketed the U-boat perfectly and exploded all around the submarine's hull, damaging it severely and forcing the Germans to surface.

*Spencer*, her sister cutter *Duane*, and many of the merchant ships in the convoy then opened fire on the U-175 as soon as the U-boat's conning tower broke the ocean's surface. The U-boat's commanding officer was killed during the initial hail of gunfire but ultimately 41 Germans abandoned ship and were rescued safely.



*"Hauled frightened and shivering from the mid-Atlantic, crewmen from a sunken Nazi submarine huddle in warm blankets on the quarterdeck of a Coast Guard combat cutter. Given cigarettes by their captors, they saw brighter days ahead. The war was over as far as they were concerned."* USCGC photograph dated 17 April 1943. Photographer: Jack January

### Technical Apprentice Training Plan by Steve Rowland



*Sleeping quarters onboard HMCS Cape Breton*

To combat a shortage of highly trained technicians which had become critical by 1951 the Royal Canadian Navy embarked on the Technical Apprentice Training Plan (TATP). A recruiting drive launched in May 1952 resulted in a group of 66 men commencing TATP training in February 1953. A 10,000 ton repair ship was commissioned as HMCS *Cape Breton* and located in HMC Dockyard, Halifax, N.S., to provide the Apprentices with living, workshop and classroom accommodation.

Successful graduates were promoted to Petty Officer Second Class after their 39 months of training until Entry 13 commenced training. Entry 13 and later entries were graduated as Leading Seamen. It became apparent in the 1960s that the original shortage of tradesmen had been overcome and the program was producing too many technicians who were entering the fleet as Leading Seamen and overloading the trade. The cost of running the apprentice scheme with reduced intake but still requiring a large staff and extensive facilities became prohibitive and the scheme was abandoned with the start of Entry 24.

The graduation of Entry 24 in 1970 marked the end of the Technical Apprentice Training Plan. Over the previous seventeen years almost 600 bright young men had trudged up the gangplank of *Cape Breton* or passed through the doors of the Apprentice wing in Naden.

At their final Annual General Meeting, the East Coast Group of the Canadian Naval Apprentice

Program decided to donate the monies left in their account to the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust and HMCS *Sackville*.

A cheque in the amount of \$2,215.81 was presented to Jim Reddy CO, HMCS *Sackville* on behalf of the group on September 24, 2016. The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust is very thankful for this generous donation.



*In September 2013, some 70 former members of the RCN and their spouses gathered in Quebec City for the 61st reunion of the Royal Canadian Navy Technical Apprentices.*

*Pictured: Laurence Christopher (RCNVR), Leading Seaman Carelle Gagné (member of HMCS Montcalm band), Jean Cauchy (Bomber Command WW2 veteran), LCdr Patricia Girard (CO, HMCS Montcalm), Lawrence Davis (Entry 11, British Columbia), Gordon Pennycook (Entry 20, Alberta), John Lind (Entry 10, Nova Scotia), and Reunion Chairman David Christopher.*

## Canada's Merchant Navy: The Men Who Saved The World

by Colonel ret'd John Boileau  
first appeared in Legion Magazine July/August 2010 and is reprinted with permission of the author.



Merchant ship survivors crowd the decks of a rescue trawler at St. John's, Nfld., April 1943.

It was the longest and hardest battle ever fought at sea. During six protracted years, more humans, ships and materiel were lost than in all the naval campaigns of the previous 500 years combined. It was arguably also the most decisive campaign of the Second World War and lasted for the entire duration of the war in Europe, from September 1939 to May 1945.

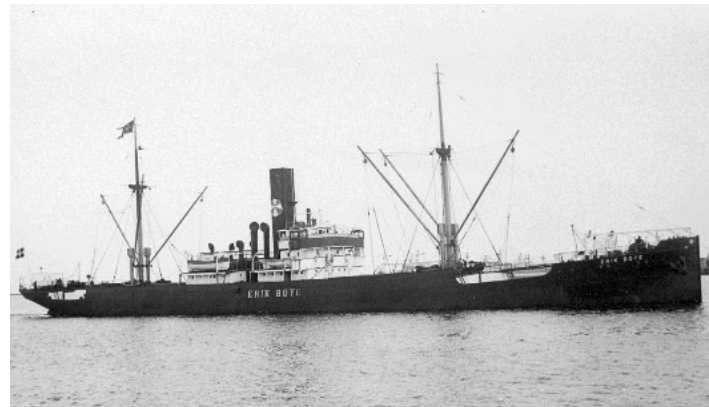
In March 1941, Winston Churchill dubbed it The Battle of the Atlantic. In his opinion, it was "the dominating factor all through the war," a daily fact of life that the Allies could not ignore, as "everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea, or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome." Writing after the conflict, Churchill noted, "The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

But Canadian seamen did not only participate in the Battle of the Atlantic. By the end of the war, Canadian merchant ships and sailors had sailed the waters of all the world's oceans, steaming relentlessly towards their destinations, through storms, surface raiders and submarines to deliver essential military and civilian supplies.

Convoy HX-47 departed Halifax on June 1, 1940, proceeding to Liverpool in Britain, 57 ships carrying mixed cargoes. Kapitänleutnant Heinrich Liebe, in command of U-38, a Type IX subma-

rine, had been shadowing the convoy for some time. In the early morning hours of June 15, near Land's End off the southwest tip of England, he fired a torpedo that struck home, sending the *Erik Boye* to the bottom. The Danish-owned, 2,238-ton vessel had been taken over by the Canadian government for the war; on this trip she was laden with 3,568 tons of wheat.

The *Erik Boye* has the dubious distinction of being the first of 72 Canadian - and Newfoundland-owned merchantmen to be sunk by the enemy during the war. Fortunately, her 22-man crew survived.



The *Erik Boye*. Photo courtesy of Danish Maritime Museum, Elsinore

Hundreds of other seamen were not as lucky, but the total is imprecise as Canadian ships and seamen often sailed under other nations' flags and

there was a lack of standardized record-keeping for merchant fleets. However, more than 1,600 Canadian and Newfoundland men and women—perhaps as many as 2,000—lost their lives due to enemy action of the approximately 12,000 that served in the Merchant Navy; a higher rate than any of the armed services—about one in eight. The first Canadian casualty—and merchant casualty—was a woman. Hannah Baird of Verdun, Que., a stewardess aboard the 13,581-ton passenger liner *Athenia*, died on Sept. 3, 1939, two days after the German invasion of Poland and the same day as Britain and France declared war. She was one of 118 lost—including a handful of Canadians—when the *Athenia* became the first ship sunk during the war, torpedoed by U-130 without warning on her westward passage to Montreal.



Cargo of pork being loaded onto an unidentified merchant ship at Halifax. Photo: R. Wright, LAC—PA184171

Only half of all merchant sailors survived the sinking of their ships during the war. In a North Atlantic winter the odds were far worse. Frigid waters brought death quickly, usually within five minutes, making the chances of survival one in 100. Yet, despite the dangers, merchant mariners, even those who survived sinkings, kept going back to do their duty and crew other ships, with only a thin plate of steel separating them from all eternity.

Ships on which Chief Steward Allan Harvie served were torpedoed nine times; on two occasions he was the sole survivor. On one voyage, he and the head cook were inside a solidly-built ice box on the top deck picking up bacon and eggs for breakfast when a torpedo struck their explosive-laden freighter. "The icebox suddenly heaved beneath our feet; the next moment it was sailing through the air. We crashed into the sea with such force that the icebox fell apart, and the cook and I found ourselves swimming for it, both badly shaken but otherwise unhurt."

Harvie and the cook were the only survivors of the 55-man crew; "saved by bacon and eggs!" in his words.

Ships and sailors have been associated with Canada since the earliest days of European contact. Ships brought the first explorers to our shores, vessels that the aboriginal inhabitants initially mistook for floating islands, complete with tall trees that disappeared into white, billowing clouds.

The endless forests of pre-Confederation Canada initially provided timber to build British vessels and by the early 19th century a home-grown shipbuilding industry had begun. By 1878, Canada was the fourth largest ship-owning nation in the world, with a merchant fleet of 7,200 vessels. Then, as European-built iron-hulled sailing ships replaced wooden square-riggers, Canadian shipbuilders found it harder to compete. By 1895, they were essentially out of business.

The most colourful and profitable days of Canadian shipbuilding were from 1849 to 1895, when many famous full-rigged ships and barques were built. In 1853 some 80 ships of between 1000 and 2000 tons each were launched in the Canadas and the Maritimes. In 1858, of the 100 sailing ships of 1200 tons or more that cleared Liverpool, Eng, for Australia, 64 were Canadian built. The Shipping Register of Liverpool showed that more than 85% of the ships over 500 tons were built in British North America. In 1875, the peak year, nearly 500 ships were built in Canadian shipyards. A prominent vessel of that glorious period was the *Marco Polo*, built at Saint John in 1851. She was big, 1625 tons, strong, and for a time "the fastest ship in the world." Another was the *W.D. Lawrence*, 2458

tons, built in 1874 at Maitland, NS, the largest Canadian-built full-rigged ship afloat.

When the First World War began in August 1914, Canada's merchant fleet was a shadow of its former self and the country had little shipbuilding capacity. While there were few Canadian merchant ships, there were hundreds of Canadian merchant seamen, and they helped man the ships of Britain and other Allied nations carrying essential supplies to Europe. At least 570 Canadian merchant mariners died during the First World War.

Although the British had advised Canada at the outset to concentrate her war efforts on the army, eventually Britain turned to Canada to build trawler and drifter type warships as well as merchant vessels. As the first contract for merchantmen was not placed until March 1918, when the war ended none had been completed, although 63 had been ordered for the Canadian government. These vessels were intended to co-operate with British shipping during wartime to carry the necessities of war, and during peacetime to transport a range of products to expand the country's export trade. They were needed sooner than anyone expected.

Two weeks before the start of the Second World War, the government confiscated Canada's 38 ocean-going vessels and placed them under the control of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Later, several vessels from enemy or occupied nations were added. Additionally, the Great Lakes fleet was called up and 133 lakers were transferred to ocean convoy duties. Ship construction also started. By the end of the war, Canadian shipyards had produced 403 cargo ships. Most of these were taken over by Britain and the United States, but a significant number sailed under Canadian flag.

Canadian ships became the property of a Crown corporation, the Park Steamship Company Limited, established in April 1942, which commissioned shipping firms to operate vessels on its behalf. By 1945, the company had taken over 127 10,000-ton Park class ships, 43 4,700-ton Gray class freighters and six 3,600-ton tankers — all built in Canada.

Fortunately, the British remembered the re-learned First World War lesson of the importance of convoys and instituted a convoy system. Halifax was chosen as the main assembly point for eastbound convoys and on Sept. 6, the first convoy of the war, HX-1, left for Britain. Among its escorts were the RCN destroyers St. Laurent and Saguenay.

Initially, ships had to be capable of making nine knots to sail in convoy, but as older and slower ships were pressed into service, slow convoys began in August 1940, using Sydney, N.S., as their departure point. Ships capable of 15 knots or better sailed independently. Typically, a 40-ship convoy would be 10 columns wide with four ships in each column. A flagship sailed at the head, carrying the convoy commodore, while escort vessels patrolled the flanks.



Aircraft aboard a merchant ship destined for England, April 1941. LAC – PA105314

One of the major challenges facing the Merchant Navy was finding enough sailors to crew the ships. The pre-war Canadian fleet comprised about 1,450 merchant sailors. Virtually all seamen with sailing experience had already been recruited by the RCN, while most of the able-bodied men without sea experience were in the army and air force. The Merchant Navy turned to shipping companies that operated on inland or coastal waterways, but also accepted men rejected by the navy or other services for being under- or overage or not meeting medical standards. To

command the ships, several retired naval officers re-enrolled, some of them in their seventies. To prepare the inexperienced crews, merchant sailors were trained at special schools. The St. Margaret's Sea Training School in Hubbards, N.S., ran courses for ordinary seamen and cadet officers, while the Marine Engineering Instructional School in Prescott, Ont., conducted training for engine room ratings.

Conditions aboard many merchant vessels often left a lot to be desired. As sinkings grew, older ships and those not intended for the open ocean were pressed into service.

Quebec City native Pierre Simard first went to sea in September 1941 as a trimmer aboard the *Skotland*, an "old broken down coal-burning ship" built as a coastal vessel for Scandinavia, possibly the "worst ship" he could have joined. Carrying a load of timber to Europe, three days out of Philadelphia, two torpedoes slammed into the *Skotland* the first ship to be hit so close to the American coast. "It was a hell of an explosion," Simard recalled, "...splinters went all over the place" seriously wounding several seamen.

In the one lifeboat that got away, Simard and his comrades looked after the wounded, but they did not have any morphine or other medicines, just a bottle of whisky. "The engineering officer was in bad shape; he had a piece of wood sticking out of his back, in his kidneys. We sawed off the piece of wood" he noted, and "left what was in there in." The survivors were picked up by a fishing boat three days later.

The threat of enemy attack was a constant concern for crews and it affected their daily lives at sea. According to Windsor, Ont., native Paul

Brick, "You slept with your life jacket. A lot of people used it for a pillow." At sea, Brick slept in his clothes and although he "slept below in a few ships," he mostly "slept on the upper deck" in case of attack.

An attack often came when a crew least expected it. For Nova Scotian Jim Boutillier, the first indication his tanker, the *Montrolite*, had been torpedoed three days out of Halifax was "sort of a blinding flash." Such surprise attacks usually disoriented some sailors; for a few minutes Boutillier "didn't know anything."



Memory of the Battle of the Atlantic: Survivors by Geoffrey Bagley Canadian War Museum: AN19850391-034

Simard recalled a similar experience when he was torpedoed again, this time in port at Wabana, Nfld., as his ship took on a load of iron ore. Around one o'clock in the morning, "I was sound asleep. First thing I knew, the ship just jumped up almost out of the water. That wakes you up. If it doesn't wake you up, that's where you're going to stay."

A good ship's cook was a valuable commodity, but many were not up to snuff. Mess boy Eric Publicover recalled a cook in the *Liverpool*

*Loyalist* who "had a job to boil an egg." He served beans, which cost three or four cents a pound, "about four times a week...and boy, they'd be like glue."

As the war progressed, the cost in materiel, men and ships grew. In 1942, during the height of the Battle of the Atlantic, the Allies lost — on average — one 10,000-ton ship every 10 hours for 31 straight days. Fifty-eight Canadian-registered merchant ships were sunk by enemy or probable enemy action. In addition, six British-registered, but Canadian government-owned, merchant ships and eight Newfoundland-registered merchantmen were lost to enemy action.



Survivors of a torpedoed merchant ship aboard HMCS Arvida at St. John's, September 1942.  
Photo: Gerald M. Moses, Library and Archives Canada – PA136285

The contribution, however, was great. During the war, 25,343 ships sailed from North America to Britain, carrying more than 180 million tons of military and civilian supplies, and thousands of other voyages occurred elsewhere. A 10,000-ton merchant ship could carry enough food to feed 225,000 people for a week.

Although the Atlantic was not the only ocean Canada's merchant mariners sailed in wartime, it was the most important. In the opinion of Rear-Admiral Leonard Murray, commander-in-chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic, "The Battle of the Atlantic was not won by any navy or air force, it was won by the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy."

Although wartime Minister of Transport J.E. Michaud declared that "merchant seamen virtually form the fourth arm of the fighting services," to its great shame the Canadian government initially denied merchant mariners the status of veterans and its attendant benefits, including pensions. The government did this for purely selfish reasons – to keep a merchant fleet operational. Postwar Minister of Transport Lionel Chevrier wrote that, "Such benefits should not be of a nature which would encourage Seamen to leave

the industry at the end of the war to seek employment in other fields as the services of many skilled Seamen will be required if Canada is to maintain a Merchant Marine after the war."

The federal government was not alone in its refusal to consider merchant sailors veterans. The Royal Canadian Legion held a similar view, although the RCL would years later have a change of heart and through dominion convention resolutions urge legislation that would recognize Second World War Canadian merchant seamen under the Veterans Charter, something that would make them eligible for the same benefits received by armed forces veterans.

Ironically, the Canadian merchant fleet – once again the fourth largest in the world – did not last very long after the war. The Liberal government of Louis St-Laurent sold the fleet off at rock-bottom prices. By the time the Korean War began in 1950, there were few Canadian merchant vessels left to support the United Nations' effort. Twelve Canadian-flagged ships did sail into the war zone, fortunately without casualties.

The refusal to recognize merchant seamen as veterans and provide them with benefits was

followed in the 1950s by another disagreeable government action – the forcible break-up of the Canadian Seaman's Union (CSU). The CSU opposed the government sell-off and called for a worldwide strike, which tied up 60 per cent of world shipping and became the largest international strike of the 20th century.

In response, the government and ship owners tried to discredit the union by labelling its members Communists (some were), at a time when the Cold War was beginning. Shipping companies and anti-Communist labour leaders – with the government's support – invited the American Hal Banks and his Seafarers' International Union (SIU) into Canada to break up the CSU. One of the most vicious episodes of labour unrest in Canadian history followed. Through a combination of secret agreements with shipping companies, intimidation and blackmail, Banks quickly destroyed the CSU. But he went too far. By 1959 his bullying tactics had turned his former allies against him and the SIU (Canadian branch) was suspended from the Canadian Labour Congress. In the early 1960s, a report from a commission of inquiry described Banks as a hoodlum and a bully. Banks fled the country following a conviction for conspiracy to assault.

In 1992, after a lengthy battle, merchant mariners were granted official status as veterans, eligible to receive disability pensions, allowances and health-care benefits accorded to veterans of the three armed services. Sadly, thousands of merchant seamen had already died by then. Additionally, nothing was done to compensate the living for the loss of benefits since 1945.

In 1998, four Merchant Navy veterans participated in a hunger strike on Parliament Hill, vowing to remain until death or the government approved a new compensation package in lieu of the demobilization benefits provided to armed forces members at the end of the war. One of them, Ossie Maclean, said in an interview, "We are the men that saved the world." The government acted, and in 2000 and 2001 began awarding cash payments under the Merchant Navy Special Benefit. In a final act of recognition, in 2003 Parliament declared September 3 annually as Merchant Navy Veterans' Day.

## Merchant Navy Women by Clare Sharpe, CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum

Just hours after Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, the unarmed passenger liner SS Athenia, in which Hanna Baird was working as a stewardess, was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine, U-130, leading to the loss of 98 passengers and 19 crew members, including Hannah Baird.

You won't find her name, or the names of the other seven Canadian women who died while serving in merchant ships during both World Wars, in the history books. Baird and the other women who perished in the Merchant Navy might be forgotten if not for the efforts of a few veterans and researchers.

"Because seamanship was considered 'men's work', the contribution of women mariners during the wars has been overlooked and has not been included in histories of the period," noted the late Tom Osborne. Osborne, a retired seaman, headed the Women Mariners Memorial Fund, an organization that aimed to make up for that oversight.

Although women played a minor role in the Canadian merchant navy, there were some pioneers working as stewardesses and a few Canadian women were radio officers on ships of the Norwegian merchant navy, the only Allied merchant fleet at that time that permitted women to serve as wireless (Radio) operators.

Maude Steane, while working as a clerk at Toronto Hydro, enrolled at the Radio College of Canada to qualify as a Wireless Operator - 2nd Class. In 1944, after completing her training, she joined the Norwegian merchant ship SS *Viggo Hansteen* at New York. The *Hansteen* was an American-built Liberty Ship transferred to Norwegian registry for emergency war transport. Just ten weeks after leaving home, Maude Steane was killed. It is reported that she died by enemy gunfire while her ship was docked in Naples, Italy. However, her family believes that she was shot by one of the *Hansteen's* male crew members, who then killed himself. Maude Steane is buried in the Allied War Cemetery near Florence, Italy.

## They Were Young

by Rear-Admiral John Newton, Commander Joint Task Force Atlantic and Maritime Forces Atlantic

The Gargan family was raised at Ferguson's Cove where mother Lucy was a school-teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. A single mother, she raised her four children, Leo, Arthur, Dougald Robert (D.R.) and Mary with the loving support of brother Tom Boyle, a Great War veteran.

She was also embraced by her greater family, especially her sister Francis and husband Jim Monaghan, himself a First World War veteran. Their children - Albert, Terry, Libby and Tela - were best friends with their Gargan cousins and spent every summer together on the cliff-like slopes at the harbour mouth.

The gravity of impending conflict in Europe was felt by the Gargans and Monaghans. The Gargan home was situated between the coastal gun batteries high on the cliff tops and not far from bivouacked troops preparing for service. In time, a great chain link anti-submarine net would be stretched from their rocky beach at Ferguson's Cove to the Maughers Beach lighthouse.



Arthur joined the Royal Canadian Artillery and was in training in Ontario when he suffered a bad sunburn and meningitis. At Ferguson's Cove, his funeral occurred at Stella Maris Catholic Church just below the ramparts of York Redoubt. They struggled carrying his casket along the rocky paths to the small settlers' cemetery on the cliff top. My mother-in-law Tela, a young girl

of six years old remembers well the long procession and the mournful atmosphere. It was July 1938.

Younger brother D.R. enlisted in the Royal Canadian Artillery as he came of age. While garrisoned on McNabs Island in final preparations for deployment to war in November 1939, D.R. was suddenly ill, slipped into a coma and died. In fear of being denied enlistment, D.R. had not disclosed that he was diabetic.

His death was a double tragedy for Lucy's family. Surviving son Leo, and daughter Mary, and all the Monaghan cousins were plunged into great sadness. The same mournful funeral and burial procession was relived. Dougald Robert Gargan was buried on the cliff top with military honours in a plot immediately adjacent to his brother Arthur.

Today, his grave is marked by a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone. He was an early casualty of the Second World War, his death recorded on page 8 of the Second World War Book of Remembrance, on display in the Memorial Chamber of Canada's Parliament Building.



Oldest brother Leo then enlisted. While garrisoned at the Connaught Battery near his home, his unit became frustrated that they were not being dispatched to the European theatre. Rioting against the perceived injustice, their case was heard and in time Leo was deployed. In his fight through to Germany, and in his service to Canada in the Royal Canadian Artillery after the war, he climbed in rank to Sergeant Major. Leo survived the war, raised a family in Halifax and was buried at Fort Massey Cemetery, Halifax. His veteran's grave is one of hundreds and hundreds marked by neatly organized granite headstones, reminiscent of the battlefield cemeteries in Europe. Each one tells a story like this.

D.R.'s cousin Albert, oldest son of Lucy's sister Francis, was deeply affected by his best friend's death. Enlisting in the great struggle, his RCAF training completed just as war ended. Albert found employment as an engineer in the Canadian National Railway, lived a long and rewarding career and life in western Canada raising a family.

He died at 94 years old in 2016. Libby, cousin of D.R., died in 2015. She had married a United States Navy officer visiting Halifax just after the war. Together they raised a large and vibrant family in Minnesota and returned every summer to Nova Scotia keeping the bonds of family alive.

D.R.'s cousin Tela, who recounted this story with the lingering sadness of the great family tragedy that it was, is an artist in Lunenburg, NS. It is her recollections that led me to discover the brothers' gravesite on the cliff top at Fergusons Cove, where caring neighbours have tended the graves of the historic settlers' cemetery for decades.

It was very moving to bring a small contingent of Canadian Armed Forces members to the gravesite and tell this story, hear the Last Post echo over the cliffs, thank the caring neighbours, and remember all the Gargans, Monaghans and other service personnel buried on the hilltop, who gave so much in peace and war - conflicts that washed ashore and affected countless families in this East Coast Port.



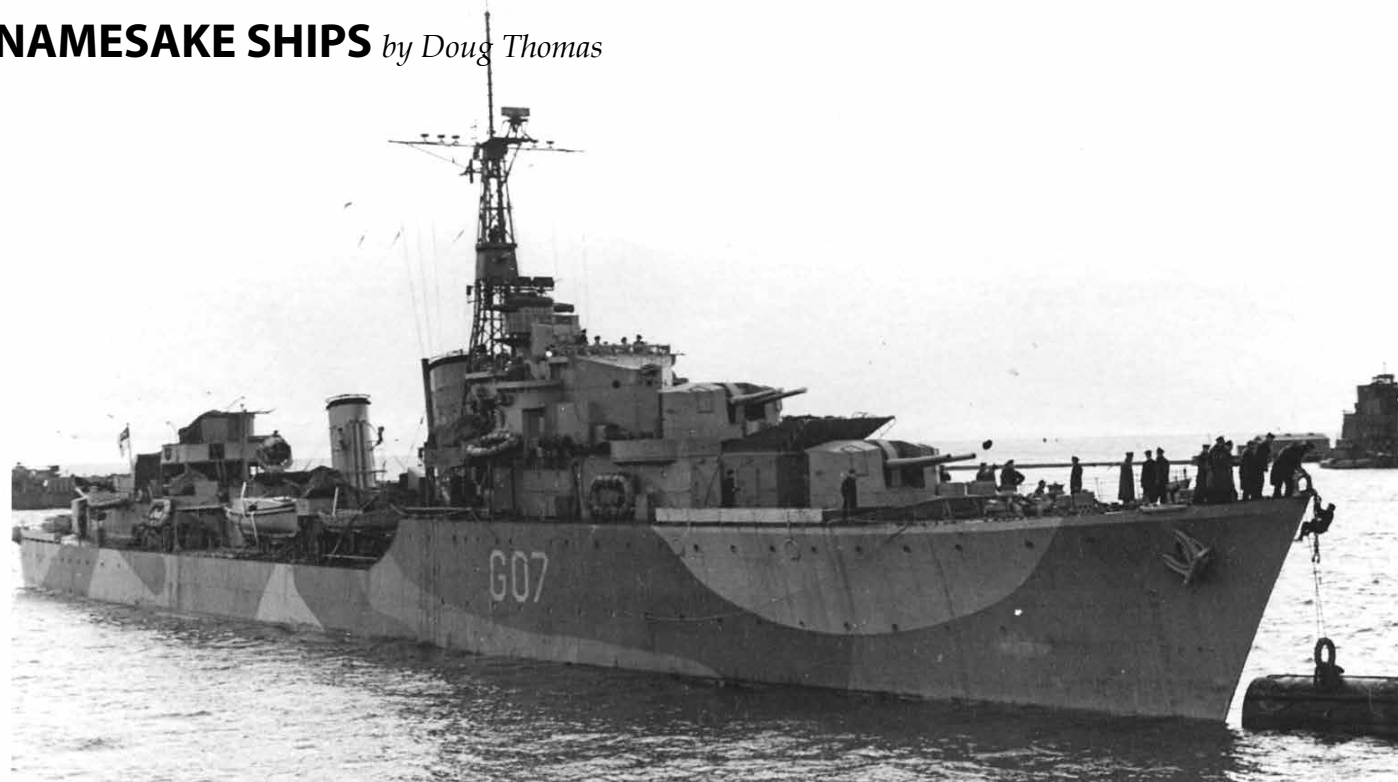
Lieutenant Commander Comisso accompanied by her daughter place poppies on a wreath at the grave of Arthur Gargan in Ferguson's Cove. Photo: Leading Seaman Peter Frew Formation Imaging Services, Maritime Forces Atlantic



Rear Admiral John Newton pays tribute to the sacrifices of the Gargan brothers who died while undergoing training in Canada in preparation for deployment to World War II. Photo: LS P.Frew, FIS, MARLANT



## NAMESAKE SHIPS *by Doug Thomas*



Action Stations is publishing a series of articles about Canadian warships of World War II whose names are perpetuated in today's Fleet. This installment will be about HMCS *Athabaskan*: (G07): one of the four Tribal Class destroyers ordered for the RCN from UK Shipyards in 1940.

*Athabaskan* was built in Newcastle-on-Tyne in England, commissioned 03 February 1943, and then joined the British Home Fleet. Like all of the 27 WW II Tribals (16 British, 3 Australian, and 8 Canadian), she was named for a "tribe" of indigenous people: the Athabaskan linguistic groups primarily in North-Western Canada and parts of Alaska. HMCS *Athabaskan*'s name was often affectionally abbreviated to Atha B by her ship's company and the Navy in general.

It is interesting to note the casualty rate of the British Tribals: only four of 16 survived the war. They were powerful fleet destroyers, and were often sent to those areas that were the most dangerous.

### War Service

The Canadian Tribals (*Athabaskan*, *Haida*, *Huron* and *Iroquois*) often operated with the RN's 10th Destroyer Flotilla, which included a British light cruiser as the Flotilla Leader, British Tribals, and

also one or two powerful destroyers of the Free Polish Navy. HMCS *Athabaskan*'s short life was very busy and somewhat ill-starred: initially deployed in heavy weather conditions to the north of the Faeroes and Iceland to intercept German blockade-runners, her hull was stressed, necessitating five weeks to repair. Later, she was hit by one of the early German glider bombs while conducting operations in the Bay of Biscay and was out of action for almost three months. Late in 1943, *Ashanti* and *Athabaskan* covered Arctic convoy RA 55A, which was involved in the Battle of North Cape in which the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* was sunk.

During 1944, *Eskimo*, *Ashanti*, *Athabaskan*, *Haida*, *Huron*, *Nubian*, *Tartar* and later *Iroquois* saw extensive action in the English Channel before and after the Normandy landings, sinking or damaging a variety of enemy ships.

On the 28th of April, HMC Ships *Athabaskan* and *Haida* were sent across the Channel to provide distant support to coastal forces laying a disruptive minefield. Early the next morning two German Elbing-class destroyers, T-24 and T-27, were detected and brought to action. In the darkness, the Germans fired a total of 12 torpedoes, one of which hit Atha B just forward of her superstructure. Fire and flooding ensued, and the

4" magazine blew up. Meanwhile, *Haida* was engaging the German destroyers: T-24 cleared the area and T-27 was driven ashore and later destroyed by Allied forces. *Haida* returned to assist Atha B, but by that time she had already sunk just five miles from the coast and daybreak was near - which meant an imminent air threat from the Luftwaffe. *Haida* picked up a total of 38 survivors before having to clear the area, and another six returned to England in *Haida*'s motor cutter which had been lowered to help recover survivors.

T-24 returned to the area later and picked up 47 *Athabaskan* survivors: a total of 85 were taken prisoner by German vessels, and spent the rest of the war in North German POW camps. Some bodies were recovered by ships or drifted ashore and were buried in 9 cemeteries in the area, including that of her captain, LCdr John Stubbs, DSO, DSC, RCN. A total of 128 officers and men were lost.

### In Memoriam

One of the under-construction Canadian Tribals was renamed *Athabaskan* as a tribute to the lost ship. École John Stubbs Memorial School in Victoria is named for John Stubbs, a native of Kelso and later Victoria, British Columbia. *Athabaskan* Island, near Bella Bella B.C., was so-named in 1945 to commemorate *Athabaskan* (I).

### Post-war

The second *Athabaskan* (219) was built in Halifax Shipyards following sister-ships *Micmac*, *Nootka* and *Cayuga*. *Athabaskan* (II) was based in Esquimalt for the next 11 years, including three deployments to Korea. Her final seven years in commission were back on the East Coast, as part of an all-Tribal escort squadron, and then paid off for disposal in 1966. *Haida*, the "Fightingest Ship in the Navy" during World War II, lives on in Hamilton, Ontario.

The current HMCS *Athabaskan* (282) is one of four gas-turbine powered Guided Missile Helicopter Destroyers, commissioned in the early 1970s. Three of the four commemorate WW II Tribals, with the fourth named after the Fleet "V" Class

WWII destroyer HMCS *Algonquin*. The new AthaB and her "Sisters of the Space Age" were busy Cold War Warriors and frequently employed as flagships for national and international operations. Like the Tribals of World War II and post-war, they were the pride of the Canadian Navy. *Athabaskan* (III) was paid-off on the 10th of March 2017, with a sail-past and great pomp and circumstance - the only one of her class to be so-honoured.



HMCS *Haida* stops to pick up survivors from the *Athabaskan*. Ink and gouache painting by William McDowell (1888 - 1950).



Staged photograph of *Athabaskan* POWs in Marlag (M) Germany



*Athabaskan* graves in Plouescat Cemetery, France

# HMCS *Athabaskan* takes final salute after 44 years of dedicated service

by Doug Thomas



HMCS *Athabaskan* flying her paying off pennant during her sail past.

HMCS *Athabaskan* was paid off during a ceremony at HMC Dockyard in Halifax on the 10th of March. *Athabaskan*, the last of the four Iroquois-class helicopter destroyers (DDH), served the Royal Canadian Navy with distinction for more than 44 years. The paying-off ceremony concluded a significant chapter in RCN history. When first commissioned, in 1972 and 1973, the Tribals, as they were known in the Navy, were referred to as the “Sisters of the Space Age” as they represented a huge technological leap for our Fleet. They embodied a number of firsts for the RCN - all gas-turbine propulsion, surface-to-air missiles, an automated operations room with a tactical data-system which could build an operational picture and exchange it with allied ships and aircraft. They were equipped with one of the most-advanced sonars in the world, which had been developed in Canada and was exported abroad. Another important capability was that of operating two large Sea King maritime helicopters, thus expanding upon the concepts pioneered in the earlier St. Laurent class DDHs.

The Tribals were highly successful vessels: our flagships during peacetime national and NATO exercises when they were employed as command platforms, assuming control broad ocean areas and many allied ships and aircraft. For the second half of their service lives they were upgraded with modern equipment which enhanced their command and control capabilities, and were fitted with an Area Air-Defence missile system - the Standard SM-2 - providing a level of fleet air defence not seen since the early 1960s when *Bonaventure*'s Banshee fighters were retired.

The Tribals and their capabilities will be sorely missed. The major acquisition of the Naval Shipbuilding Policy is to be the 15 Canadian Surface Combatants (CSC), a portion of which are intended to provide the Command and Control / Air-Defence Capability which was provided by the Tribals during 1972- 2017. Let us hope they will be as capable in their time as were HMC Ships *Iroquois*, *Huron*, *Athabaskan* and *Algonquin* in theirs. In the meantime, the Halifax- Class frigates recently modernized and refitted for further service, will fill the gap until the CSC returns the navy to its full potential, just as the Tribal-class destroyers did during their remarkable era of service.

“HMCS *Athabaskan* and her Iroquois-class sister ships served the RCN exceptionally well for more than 40 years. While we look back on the great contribution made by these vessels - and their crews - to Canadian defence, and the support provided to our Allies and partners around the world, we also look toward the future, and ensuring the Royal Canadian Navy remains responsive and capable, through the Canadian Surface Combatant project that will replace both the Iroquois-class destroyers and our Halifax-class frigates.”

— Minister of National Defence, Harjit S. Sajjan

“Today we celebrate the end of an era. HMCS *Athabaskan* is the last of the Tribal-class destroyers to be decommissioned. When Canada put this ship into service the technological achievements were so impressive that the Tribals

were referred to as the “sisters of the space age”. For those of us fortunate to have sailed in these ships we celebrate the important leadership role that *Athabaskan*, and her sister ships, fulfilled in the defence of Canada and in support of partners and allies. Canadians can proudly reflect on Canada’s response to the occupation of Kuwait, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the devastating earthquake in Haiti. I know that those of us serving today, are proud to continue to follow in the wake of all those who have so brilliantly served in HMCS *Athabaskan* during the last 44 years. We stand here today as equally committed and dedicated as those who walked aboard her on the day of her commissioning.”

“As a former sailor who was trained and mentored on the decks of a Tribal-class destroyer, I am struck by the great significance of this ship’s decommissioning. The name *Athabaskan*, and those of her sister ships *Iroquois*, *Algonquin* and *Huron*, conjure up the greatness of our country, its vast geography, the first peoples, and the impactful contributions of the Royal Canadian Navy in war and peace. There are tens of thousands of Canadians who served aboard these ships and whose hearts ache for what has passed. To them, I salute their service and praise their contributions to a navy that remains focused, effective and fully committed to providing value-added contribution to maritime security operations wherever there is water and whenever called upon by the Government of Canada.”

— Rear Admiral John Newton, Commander

## Maritime Forces Atlantic Quick Facts

- HMCS *Athabaskan*, an area air defence destroyer, served on a number of domestic and expeditionary operations, protecting Canada’s sovereignty in the North Atlantic Ocean. A helicopter-carrying, anti-submarine warfare destroyer, the ship was designed and built for operations in the stormy North Atlantic, enforcing Canadian laws in its territorial waters.

- When a ship reaches the end of its commission, it is “paid off”, a term that dates

from the days when sailors were literally paid the wages owing them as they went ashore. The Ensign and the Captain’s pennant were hauled down and the ship was usually placed in reserve.

- Today the ship’s company gave a last cheer to the ship and marched off for the final time, followed by the Commanding Officer being piped ashore as the commissioning pennant, Jack, and Ensign were hauled down and the port flag hoisted. A fitting tribute to a warship and its sailors who served with distinction.

## Highlights of the Paying-Off Ceremony

Photographs by Sandy McClearn



## Book Review

### Too Young to Die: Canada's Boy Soldiers and Airmen in the Second World War

Strength in numbers: a mantra we've all heard when it comes to times of war and conflict. Removing ourselves from present day and rewinding 75 years, this mindset was engrained in the young men across our country as the Second World War raged across the Atlantic.

John Boileau and Dan Black go to great lengths in their latest book to show that patriotism and the desire to fight for the country we love was not decided by age but by passion for our land and fellow countrymen.

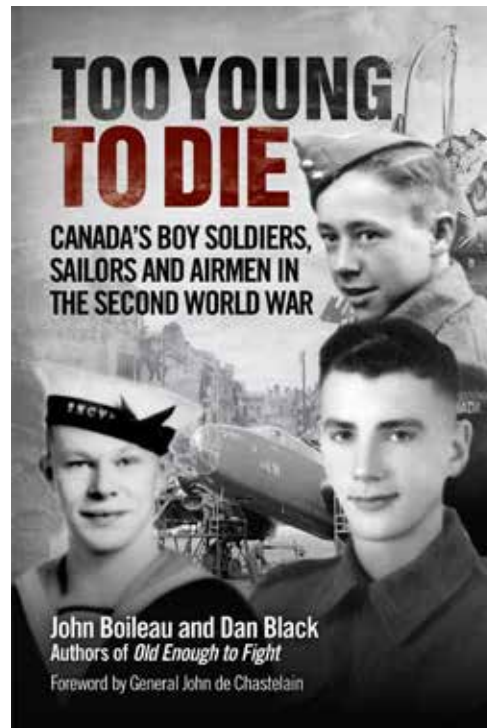
*Too Young to Die: Canada's Boy Soldiers and Airmen in the Second World War, sheds light on the thousands of young men who fought to fight in the Second World War, despite some being as young as 15 years old. Speaking with Black and Boileau, it became clear that although the task of sharing the stories of these young men was daunting, each felt there was a certain responsibility in accurately depicting their tales. Boileau reinforced this, saying, "That these boys had the fortitude to persevere and join up in the face of several obstacles is nothing short of amazing."*

Focusing on the underage boys looking to join the armed forces, both Black and Boileau had to comb through archival records from all over the country and interview surviving veterans to ensure the book was "extensively researched, well-written and authoritative" according to Boileau, and therefore it took several years before this work was ready for public eyes.

*Too Young to Die: Canada's Boy Soldiers and Airmen in the Second World War, sheds light on the thousands of young men who fought to fight in the Second World War, despite some being as young as 15 years old.*

Listening to Black explain the motivation and reasoning behind tackling such a subject, I won-

dered if there was a certain time, or if there was a certain experience in writing this book, that stood out from writing typical novels based on the Second World War. This 20th century event could easily be seen as one of the most written about topics in modern times and, therefore, it is intriguing that Black and Boileau decided to focus on a perspective that many are unaware of.



Black explains from his Ottawa residence that while writing *Old Enough to Die* (the first installment of these stories), "I had to pause when I realized that we had better interview some of these veterans that are still alive now. Sadly, when it came time to write *Too Young to Die* many of these men had since passed away, so I am glad we were able to take the time and hear their stories while we had the chance."

Reading through *Too Young to Die*, it's clear that there is an abundance of young men's stories to be told. Curious about which ones were deemed important enough to include in the

book, I curiously asked what was the criteria for being included.

Boileau answered this by saying, "One very important priority – probably the most important one – for including a boy was having enough detail to tell his story in sufficient detail to make him a distinct individual, someone that the reader could relate to."

Black also explained that, "While there may very be other stories and ones that would be interesting, we can only write about what we can learn and find from the archival records." The events that these authors are trying to recount not only occurred more than 70 years ago, but due to many of the records being falsified in order to accommodate the young men's combat wishes, an overwhelmingly large number of records are either inaccurate or have been lost due to confusion when being reviewed by the veteran estate departments.

*In Too Young to Die*, the authors do an exemplary job of ensuring reliability to the young men. In

reading about the merchant navy, for example, it was interesting how Black and Boileau felt the need to explain that, depending on what type of vessel the men were on, they would either sleep with their uniform on, or not bother. The reasoning behind this was that if a more fragile vessel was struck there was no chance of survival so wearing a uniform would be pointless, whereas if there was a chance of escape after being hit by an enemy strike, uniforms were worn.

Black's way of answering my query about this unusual detail was to explain "that these young men were not any different than you or I. These men were just doing what they thought was best and what they believed in."

In an effort to not rehash the entire writing process and delve into a history lesson, I was curious to find out not only what the motivation behind this work was, but also to learn at what point did these authors realize that what they were working on was something unique in itself – a book that told the stories many had not known about from this time.

Boileau answers this query by explaining, "The reason for telling these stories is quite simple: They had never been told before and we felt they were important enough to be told as a part of Canadian military, social and family history."

*Through Too Young to Die* remains a fact-based, non-fiction work, both Boileau and Black are able to keep the attention of the reader due to the accessibility of the tales being told. Boileau explains that being "the first book about Canadian boy soldiers, we wanted it to be the definitive book on the topic, extensively researched, well-written and authoritative."

Discovering new stories regarding the Second World War continues to grow the minds of Canadians and forces us to come to terms with the sacrifices that those men and women put themselves through all those years ago. Black and Boileau's book adds another chapter to the event that happened lifetimes ago. Connecting with the young men and learning their stories leaves a lasting impression on the reader. The intimacy and empathy felt for these young men is something that lives on long after the final pages of the book have been turned.

## Mailbag

As usual, a very elegant and interesting edition of "Action Stations." Keeps we distant members/trustees in touch, which unless one visits Halifax, is the glue holding us to *Sackville*. BZ!

### Two minor items:

1. Attached a piece I prepared some time ago re the largest convoy. We hear all sorts of claims, but of the officially recorded ones, this was the largest. A couple of others had more ships in their count, but with departures and arrivals, Arnold Hague in his reliable "The Allied Convoy System 1939-1945" (Vanwell, 2000) says it was the largest. Others may be shown as more, but with arrivals and departures this is the largest ocean passage convoy. The ocean escort all Canadian too.

2. In Doug Pemberton's good article on the sinking of *British Freedom*, he notes that U-1232 also sank the Park steamer *Nipiwana Park* off Halifax. Two points here: actually, he only sank the bow 1/3rd, as although that portion broke off and sank, the rest was towed into Halifax, and just post-war a new bow was built for her and she recommissioned as Irving Oil's *Irving Lake*. The only Canadian registered merchantman that was "partly sunk!" Also, interestingly, although all the Parks were named after actual Federal or Provincial parks, the park in Manitoba is named Nipawin Park, not Nipiwana. The Collingwood Shipbuilding just got it wrong in the haste to build her, and maybe with the reluctance to change names of ships, it was left as launched. (Reference: my "Sink All The Shipping There," Vanwell.)

Fraser McKee



HMCS Moose Jaw launched at Collingwood Shipyards Ltd., Collingwood, Ontario - 9 Apr 1941.

## THE LARGEST CONVOY OF WWII:

By the time of the Normandy invasion in mid-1944 researchers in the field of anti-U-boat operations had proven that as long as there was reasonable close escort protection and air cover, the size of convoys could be increased to any controllable amount, and that the controlling factor now was collecting the ships for sailing, and dock and cargo handling facilities at their reception ports in the U.K., Russia and, soon, France. Thus the war's largest convoy sailed out of New York on July 17, 1944, bound for the U.K. initially. Canada's C5 mid-ocean group provided it's only defensive protection from July 24th to it's arrival on August 3rd, 16 days after departure. While this particular convoy was not attacked by U-boats (all fully involved at Hitler's and Doenitz's urging in trying to defeat the invasion resupply forces), it was quite an achievement.

Eventually the convoy consisted of 166 merchantmen (one British vessel had become involved in a collision, was towed in, but was a 'CTL' - constructive total loss; another Brit was strictly a rescue ship, if needed). When formed up for the ocean passage, it extended 9 miles across its front and 4 miles deep. At least 21 naval vessels were directly involved at various times. From the departure there were ships of the Western Local Escort Force from the USN and Canadian Navies, corvettes, Algerines, Bangors, 2 RN trawlers and a Norwegian Navy trawler; then 2 RN trawlers that joined from Western Approaches on the last days, as the mass of ships approached the U.K. The C5 Mid-Ocean group consisted of one frigate, HMCS *Dunver* (Lt. Wm. Davenport, RCNVR), the Castle Class squid-fitted corvette *Hespeler*, and the corvettes *Dauphin*, *Wetaskiwin*, *New Westminster*, *Algoma* and *Long Branch*. By now a pretty experienced group of ships, led as an Escort Group by Cdr George Stephens, RCN, who had already spent 3½ years at sea as an escort C.O., had sunk one U-boat.

Of the merchantmen 109 sailed from New York ports, 30 joined from Halifax, 24 from Sydney and 3 from St. John's. They consisted of 76 American ships, 49 British, 17 Norwegian, 9 Greek (one built in 1905, 39 years old!), 6 from

Netherlands owners, 3 each from Poland, Yugoslavia and Panama and 1 each from Sweden and France. There were 26 tankers (16%) with various cargoes in the group, 4 MAC ships - Merchant Aircraft Carriers - with their own cargoes as well, although one of which was simply transporting non-operational aircraft. 8 merchantmen, all escort oilers of which there were 10, also carried some 427 spare depth charges in case the ocean escorts ran short, about 50 in each ship. On arrival, 10 of these vessels were destined to go on to Russian and Iceland with other convoys.

The Convoy Commodore was Rear Admiral Sir Aubrey T. Tillard, KBE, DSO in a British ship, with his Vice-Commodore, an RN Vice-Admiral in a Norwegian.

The safe arrival of every ton or gallon of cargo, ranging from iron ore pellets to railway locomotives, every person, every valuable ship, is quite a testament to how competent we all had become in convoying, at the cost of one damaged ship.

*The MAC-ships were situated center-rear in the convoy formation within a space of 1x3 miles in which they could turn into the wind to launch aircraft.*



*Members of the air party and two Swordfish aircraft on the snow-covered flight deck of the MAC ship M/V Ancyclus.*



*Fairey Swordfish landing on Empire MacAlpine*



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