

HMCS Burlington: Story of the Ship

By Joseph P. Kearney

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939 Canada's naval forces consisted of six relatively modern destroyers, five minesweepers, and two training ships. Total manpower was 145 officers and 1,671 men. Fortunately there were twenty one Naval reserve Divisions in the larger cities across the country. HMCS *Star* in Hamilton was one of these. The manpower of these reserve divisions boosted the total numbers to 366 officers and 3,477 men. These figures certainly did not in any way deter the ambitions of Nazi Germany.

At war's end in 1945, Canada would boast a navy of just under four hundred ships and close to a hundred thousand men and women wearing navy blue uniforms. Ships of the Royal Canadian Navy, alone, or with the assistance of others sank, captured or destroyed forty two enemy surface ships. Perhaps more importantly they sank 27 U-boats.

The Battle of The Atlantic took on many scenarios. German battleships broke out of their heavily fortified ports to wreak havoc on convoys. The U-boats tried to strangle the convoy systems from North America to Great Britain; they also laid mines in strategic areas of operation. One of these areas was our own east coast, including the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The U-boat Commanders were becoming more daring, buoyed up by their early successes. To combat these threats many different type of ships were required. This is the story of one of those ships: HMCS *Burlington*, a Bangor class minesweeper. As enemy mines were only laid once (1943) in Canadian waters, the Bangors were used principally as escorts to coastal shipping or as local escorts to ocean convoys.

HMCS *Burlington* was laid down at the Dufferin Shipbuilding Company in Toronto on the 4th of July 1940. On the 6th of September, 1941 she was commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy; Lieutenant Commander W.J. Fricker, Royal Canadian Navy, assumed command.

Her first Port of Call was the town she was named in honour of: Burlington, Ontario. There she was dedicated in a ceremony by the Rev. G.S. Tebbs of St. Luke's Anglican Church. As was the case in hundreds of towns and cities across Canada during hostilities, the ship was adopted by the citizens of Burlington. The ship was presented with a ship's bell, suitably inscribed, and a silk White Ensign.

The following morning, on September 11th, HMCS *Burlington* slipped her moorings and began her journey to the Maritimes to take her part in The Battle of the Atlantic; a battle which spanned several years.

Burlington's career began on a cold windy day in December, 1941 when along with other naval escorts she escorted HFX 166, a convoy bound from Halifax to the United Kingdom. Her duties

were to deliver the convoy to the Western Rendezvous which was in the vicinity off Cape Race, Newfoundland. There she would turn the convoy over to a larger ocean escort group commanded by the United States Destroyer, *Plunkett*.



HMCS Burlington

The ship's company of *Burlington* may have been apprehensive as their tidy new ship sailed slowly past the Citadel high on the hill overlooking Halifax Harbour. Minutes later George's Island and the submarine nets guarding the harbour entrance would slip slowly astern. Once past Sambro Head at the mouth of the harbour the ocean currents would take charge. The motion of the sea under the hull would be unsettling to some. Others would find to their dismay they were prone to seasickness.

Perhaps it was at this point their apprehension would increase. After all, for the most part they were a group of young Canadians. War was something foreign to many in their generation as was the sea with all its natural perils. It too was new to them. For most their areas of expertise were in farming, manufacturing, or administration. Others were barely out of school, while some a short two years ago were riding the rails across the vastness of the nation seeking relief from a crippling depression. They were to exchange the relative safety of a freight car pulled across an endless prairie to find themselves fully clothed and attempting sleep in a hammock on a freezing storm-tossed Atlantic.

Burlington's first convoy escort was uneventful and she returned safely to Halifax. In January of 1942 the U-boats were sinking ships almost with impunity. On the twelfth of January, *Burlington*, along with her sister ship, HMCS *Red Deer*, steamed with all dispatch (maximum sustained speed) to assist the merchant ship SS *Cyclops* which had been struck by two torpedoes, and was sinking 160 miles south of Halifax. The weather in the North Atlantic during the winter was a bitter enemy in itself: huge seas pounded the ships as if attempting to distract them from their mission. Spray and spindrift flew over the bridge and was carried aft in the gale-like wind; soaking bridge watch-keepers and lookouts alike.

When the minesweepers arrived, *Red Deer* went among the eighteen rafts and five boats the crew of the *Cyclops* were able to launch before the second torpedo sent her to the bottom. *Red Deer* plucked the living from the small crafts while *Burlington* took up the hunt for the U-boat at the same time trying to screen the rescue operation. They were only to save ninety three out of the hundred and eighty-one complement aboard *Cyclops*. The remainder had perished through the blast of the torpedoes and the uncaring embittered Atlantic weather. The sinking of the *Cyclops* was the beginning of a new era in the Atlantic: twenty German U-boats had been deployed to the American eastern seaboard.

On the twenty fifth of March, 1942 the 6,256 ton Dutch tanker *Ocana*, bound from Curacao to Halifax was torpedoed by U-552 off Shelburne, Nova Scotia. A fishing boat witnessed the torpedoing and quickly informed naval authorities in Halifax. Then followed what could be alluded to as another saga of the sea. *Ocana* had been carrying a cargo of 9,000 tons of high test gasoline. The patrol vessel HMCS *Fleur de Lis* was the first ship dispatched to the scene. Despite the volatility of the cargo, *Fleur de Lis* sent a fire fighting party to board her. After heroic efforts the small party was able to bring the fire under control; however *Ocana*'s damage was extensive.

Besides the fire damage there was a hole in her side eighty feet in diameter. Despite the desperate state of *Ocana*, the captain of *Fleur de Lis* decided she could be salvaged. Although the weather was rapidly deteriorating a line was put aboard *Ocana* and she was taken in tow. By early next morning the weather had turned so foul the towing had to cease. For the next three weeks all attempts to salvage the vessel failed. Both the winter weather and a series of misadventures were to make it impossible to salvage *Ocana*.

After the first two weeks of trying to keep her afloat, another storm tore away the tugs that were attempting to salvage her. She was not seen again for four days when a merchant ship reported sighting her on the edge of the Gulf Stream. *Ocana* was then 221 miles from where she was torpedoed. The patrol vessels *Fleur de Lis* and HMCS *Laurier*, along with a tug, sailed out of Shelburne. Eventually they caught up with *Ocana*. Once more a tow line was passed over from the tug. Taken in tow she was brought back to the very position where she had been torpedoed. Luck still eluded *Ocana*. Another winter gale had come up and she went down in thirty two fathoms. Yet, *Ocana* still refused to give up. Her bows stuck eighteen feet out of the water as if

to defy the very sea that had borne her during her life. The difficult and dangerous task of blowing up the hulk with depth charges fell to *Laurier*. Only four out of a crew of sixty survived the *Ocana's* ordeal. Once again the cruel Atlantic winter claimed its due.

HMCS *Burlington* played an important part in the saga of the *Ocana*. She had been one of the first on the scene escorting the ocean going tug *Ocean Eagle*. It was her duty to screen the rescue operation from further attack by U-boats in the area, and she had also attempted to tow the stricken tanker. After the sinking of the hulk, *Burlington* made her way back to Halifax.

In May of 1942 *Burlington* was transferred to the Gaspé Force. Numerous German U-boats had opened attacks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The number of sinkings was increasing alarmingly, and escort ships were in short supply. With the advent of the United States joining the war, the theatre of operations was greatly expanded. American sea power for the most was directed to the Pacific to check the ambitions of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

The entire Atlantic Seaboard from South America through the Caribbean and up to Labrador had become a hunting ground for the Wolf Packs of U-boats. *Burlington* was dispatched to the port of Gaspé, P.Q. via Sydney, Nova Scotia on the twelfth of May. Her duties were chiefly to escort convoys from Quebec City to Sydney, Nova Scotia and return. As well as the convoy duties, *Burlington* was called upon for submarine patrol searches.



A light-line transfer between *Burlington* and HMCS *Gananoque*

In early June, U-553, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Thurmann, was operating south of Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St Lawrence. On the night of the eleventh of June he sent two torpedoes crashing into the SS *Nicoya*. Less than three hours later he torpedoed the Dutch freighter, *Leto*. The sounds of the explosions rumbled across the water and flames from the two burning ships were clearly visible ashore. Soon crowds on the shore were helping the exhausted, burned and wounded survivors ashore.

These were the waters that *Burlington* plied during that fateful spring and summer of 1942. What thoughts must have gone through the minds of the crew of *Burlington* as the war brought all its ferocity and horrors to our very shores. The government was criticized for not putting more emphasis in the war in the Gulf. It was reluctantly decided that the convoys crossing the Atlantic to Great Britain were of more importance. Henceforth, a news blackout was put into effect and no more sinking's were reported in the Gulf.

In July of 1942, the steamships, *Hainaut* and *Anastasios* were torpedoed and sunk. They were part of a convoy from Quebec to Sydney. Another ship, the SS *Dinaric* was torpedoed in the starboard side; she remained afloat for a while but had to be sunk as she was a hazard to navigation. The Bangor class minesweeper HMCS *Drummondville* took up the hunt for the U-boat with *Burlington* assisting her. Continuing her hunt into the night for the U-boat, *Drummondville* fired star shell. The illumination from the star shell turned the darkness into day, and the submarine was spotted on the surface. The commander of the sub gave immediate orders to dive as *Drummondville* bore down on her in an attempt to ram. *Burlington* and *Drummondville* continued to depth charge the area. The submarine managed to escape, although it was thought to have been severely damaged. This huge area of the St Lawrence River and Gulf was defended from the spring of 1942 until November of the same year by two corvettes, five minesweepers, and a few motor launches and the armed yacht HMCS *Raccoon*.

Burlington continued Gulf operations performing various duties; she had escorted over thirty convoys. On December 16th, 1942, *Burlington*, along with two other Bangors, *Red Deer* and *Gananoque*, were transferred to Sydney Force. On the 19th *Burlington* was dispatched to aid HMS *Campobello*. Enroute she ran into pounding seas north of the Magdalen Islands. She had lost her asdic dome and oscillator. The ice build-up was so heavy that she was listing 45 degrees to starboard. In the violent sea depth charges were swept overboard which could have had disastrous consequences. As well, her large whaler had to be jettisoned as the ship could not be righted properly.

On the 21st, while attempting to put a line aboard *Campobello*, *Burlington*'s bow came into contact with the other ship causing considerable structural damage. *Burlington* managed to take *Campobello* in tow and safely brought her to port at Chandler.

It was agreed by all at the time that *Burlington*, ignoring great danger and risk to herself, performed extremely well. The captain and ship's company were praised for their seamanship

and judgment under exceptionally adverse conditions. The sorely-wounded minesweeper headed for Sydney, and then on to Halifax on the 26th of December.

Early in January of 1943 *Burlington* sailed to Lunenburg to begin a refit which was to last until March 7th. She returned to Halifax for further refitting. In June she was transferred to the Halifax local Defence Force for minesweeping duties. Although German minelaying was unlikely, the only way to be sure mines had not been laid was to sweep the seaward approach lanes into major ports. For the next year and a half *Burlington* continued to operate in a convoy escort roll with brief periods of following up on U-boat sightings. The convoy escorting was usually of a routine nature, and it was not unusual for long periods of boredom to set in. However the ship's company had to be continually alert.

By 1944 the tide of battle was beginning to turn in favour of the Allies in the Battle of the Atlantic. The shipyards in Halifax were embarked on building Tribal class destroyers. Other shipyards on the St. Lawrence and throughout the Great Lakes were building frigates, corvettes, and minesweepers at an accelerated pace. Crews were being trained on more effective equipment and armaments. Throughout all this the U-boat menace still loomed large. Germany was turning out submarines with more effective weaponry and much longer range.

On Christmas Eve 1944, the corvette HMCS *Fennel*, along with *Burlington* left Halifax harbour escorting a convoy. The crews on the upper decks of the two ships witnessed an explosion at the stern of the Bangor class minesweeper, *Clayoquot*, which had been struck by an acoustic torpedo. The senior officer in *Fennel* ordered *Burlington* to action stations. *Burlington* immediately increased to full speed and streamed her CAAT gear. (The CAAT gear is a noise-making device towed astern of the ship, was intended to draw acoustic torpedoes away from the ship's propellers) *Burlington*'s quick response in carrying out the orders was indeed fortunate. No sooner had she streamed her torpedo decoy when a huge explosion took place four hundred yards astern of her.

Within nine minutes *Clayoquot* vanished beneath the waves. The frigate HMCS *Kirkland Lake* and another Bangor minesweeper HMCS *Transcona* commenced searching for the U-boat. *Fennel* closed in on the wreckage of *Clayoquot*. The water temperature was 42 degrees, and it was imperative that the survivors, many of whom were wounded, be rescued from the frigid waters. A ship in the convoy, *SS Lady Rodney*, had a large passenger list. The senior officer in *Fennel* ordered *Burlington* to escort her back into Halifax harbour with all dispatch, fearing she could become another maritime tragedy. *Burlington* escorted the *Lady Rodney* out of harm's way and returned to join in the search for the U-boat.

Through her quick actions *Fennel* was able to save seventy-five of *Clayoquot*'s crew of 83. She quickly took them into Halifax, put them ashore and immediately returned to assist in hunting the U-boat. Unfortunately the U-boat managed to make good its escape, and *Burlington* and the other escorts resumed escorting their convoy.

In January 1945 *Burlington* collided in Halifax harbour with a Fairmile Motor Launch. She was badly holed and the plates on her starboard side were crumpled. Following a refit in Halifax she continued to be employed on convoy escort duties. She was only to hunt for one more submarine in early March. On April 22nd, she once again went for a short refit. By the time it was finished the war with Germany had ended, bringing to a close the Battle of the Atlantic: the longest battle of the war.

HMCS *Burlington* was employed in various duties in the months following the cessation of hostilities, and then she was paid off for disposal on 30 October 1945 and sold to a New Jersey buyer in 1946 – apparently for scrap, as were many other warships at that time. She had served her purpose.

About the author: Joseph Kearney served in the Canadian Navy from 1952 to 1977, and is a member of the Chief and Petty Officer's Associations on both coasts. He is a freelance writer who has published a number of stories about the wartime Canadian Navy, some of which he has kindly made available to the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust. He now makes his home in Victoria, BC.