

PRESERVING THE LAST CORVETTE

Of the many corvettes built by the Allies during the Second World War, only HMCS *Sackville* remains afloat. Her survival, however, owed more to good fortune than good planning. Sub-Lieutenant Blake Patterson details the fighting history of the last of the line.

The Flower-class corvette HMCS *Sackville* was built by the Saint John Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Co. Ltd of Saint John, New Brunswick. She was launched on 15 May 1941, and commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy on 30 December 1941. It was a further four months before she was ready to put to sea and it was not until 15 May 1942 that HMCS *Sackville* left Halifax, Nova Scotia to join the war.

Under the command of Lieutenant Alan Easton, RCNR, HMCS *Sackville* was assigned to the Mid-Ocean Escort Force as part of Escort Group C-3 along with the destroyers *Saguenay* and *Skeena* and the other Flower Class corvettes *Galt* and *Wetaskiwin*. She also served with C-1 and C-2 Escort Groups, escorting convoys from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Londonderry, Ireland, from January 1942 to August 1944.

It was whilst engaged in these convoy duties that HMCS *Sackville* had her moments of greatest glory. In late July and early August 1942 HMCS *Sackville* formed part of the escort for Convoy ON-115, which also consisted of the destroyers *Saguenay* and *Skeena* and three other corvettes *Agassiz*, *Louisville*, and *Wetaskiwin*. Made up of faster merchant vessels, some forty-one in total, all elements of the convoy had joined from Moville, Clyde, Liverpool and Lock Ewe by 25 July 1942. The ultimate destination, indicated by the ON convoy routing code, was New York.

The journey was relatively uneventful for the first two days. Then, on the 27th, the air cover ended. Worse, evidence of impending trouble was recorded by the

crew of at least one of the escorts which had started intercepting a "tell-tale series of German medium-frequency radio transmissions".

Convoy ON-115 and its escorts continued to maintain radio silence in order to deny the German U-boats every opportunity of homing onto it. However, as the Senior Officer of the escort group later lamented, "several ships in the convoy were making smoke so bad (*sic*), the convoy was visible even at night about fifteen miles."¹ Indeed, it was a visual sighting that drew the U-boat packs to the convoy.

By 29 July, ON-115 was being tracked east of Newfoundland by the *Wolf* and *Pirat* U-boat groups (seven and six submarines respectively). The next day the U-boats pounced.

These first submarine attacks, and those on the 31st, were driven off by the

escort, which consisted of the destroyers *Saguenay* and *Skeena* and the four corvettes *Agassiz*, *Louisville*, *Wetaskiwin* and *Sackville* – all of whom were taking advantage of the U-boats' repeated transmission of homing signals. In this running battle of wills, the Type VIIC U-boat *U-588* was located and sunk by depth charges from the corvette HMCS *Wetaskiwin* and destroyer HMCS *Skeena*. The submarine went down with all hands. It was first blood to the Allied warships.

During the night of the 31st the German boats lost contact with ON-115 but *Saguenay* and *Skeena* were short of fuel and they left the convoy to return to Newfoundland. There were now just the four corvettes to protect ten times that number of merchant ships.

After several high-speed chases, HMCS *Wetaskiwin* was short of fuel and also had to leave the convoy. On 2 August, the escort was replenished by the destroyers *Hamilton* and *Witch* and the corvette *Galt*, and only just in time, because *U-552*

located the convoy once again east of Cape Race and vectored the rest of the packs onto the target.

The Germans attacked and the Commodore ordered sharp course changes, the result of which was that one column became separated from the others. The escorts, meanwhile, went into action. Lieutenant Easton, on the bridge of HMCS *Sackville*, later recalled the events that followed after sighting one of the submarines on the surface:

"Can you see anything, Number One?" Easton asked.

"There it is a bit to starboard!"

"Full Ahead."

"Fire, Number One." This was a star shell to illuminate the area of attack. It revealed a U-boat lying broadside on the corvette's starboard bow, less than 400 yards away. She had just got under way, working her propellers at full speed and was beginning to dive.

"Fire again."

The U-boat was still ahead of them but only the upper part of her conning tower was still showing. "Stand by to ram! Set Pattern A." The latter referred to a series of depth charges.

"Would we reach her in time?" continued Easton. "We were desperately close. In the pool of light shed by the flare we saw the U-boat's conning tower disappear. I waited for the crash. Another thirty feet [but] it did not come. The streak of foaming, swirling water was beneath the gun deck now.

"Fire! There were simultaneous

explosions [from the depth charges]. We turned and steamed back. In a minute or so the asdic operator reported he had contact, and we ran in and fired five charges. [Then] a strong smell of diesel oil came to us. We all looked over the side to see if any oil was visible on the water. It was too dark to see anything."

HMCS *Sackville*'s torpedo officer watched from the bridge: "The depth charge from the starboard thrower sank fifty feet and then exploded, as did the others. It must have touched the U-boat's after deck as it went off, for a moment later the bow of the U-boat broke the surface a few feet astern. She rose up out of the water to an angle of about forty degrees exposing one-third of her slender hull. Her momentum was still carrying her forward at right-angles to our course. As she hung for an instant poised in a precarious position, a depth charge which had been dropped over the stern rail exploded immediately beneath her and she disappeared in the huge column of water.

"She'll never surface again, sir," the torpedo officer concluded.

The submarine was in fact *U-43*. Its log recorded that "the whole boat received a powerful sharp blow that knocked out electro motors, depth-gauge and tactical table". The crew was disoriented: depth gauges sprung suddenly from an indication of 170 metres to zero. The port engine seized up. With its starboard engine still operating at full speed ahead, the U-boat settled some 7° degrees down by the stern.

Within thirty seconds of

MAIN PICTURE: The last serving Flower-class corvette, HMCS *Sackville*, at her summer berth on Halifax waterfront, where she is berthed alongside the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. During the winter this wartime veteran is berthed in Her Majesty's Canadian Dockyard on the western side of Halifax Harbour. She was launched on 15 May 1941, by Mrs. J.E.W. Oland, wife of the captain of the port, with the Mayor and entire town council of her namesake town in attendance. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)





the final attack, U-43's log noted that the submarine "shuddered and broke surface". Another emergency dive took it to a depth of 120 metres.² Though the U-boat had been badly damaged, and one crewman had suffered critical internal injuries, it survived its encounter with the corvette and reached Lorient having been at sea for forty-three days.

Not long after engaging U-43, Sackville was in action yet again, as Lieutenant Easton later described: "The radar operator called out, 'I've just started up again, sir ... and I think that there's something in the ground wave. It's too close to get the direction.'

"Keep a sharp lookout there, I sang out to lookouts and the signalmen on the bridge.

"Submarine on the port beam."
"Full ahead! Hard aport! Port beam – submarine – open fire!"

"The ship glided slowly on. She could not pick up headway swiftly like a destroyer. And she was too sluggish on the helm at this speed to turn fast, the enemy being inside our turning circle. The U-boat was drawing abaft the beam but either the gunlayer or the trainer, or both, could not find her. The dimness of the foggy night made it difficult for them. Then the submarine drew just



abaft the safety bearing and the gun could not reach any farther. Then there was a colossal sound of escaping air, and the U-boat went down like a stone. She submerged so quickly that I could hardly believe my eyes.

"The ship was at last gathering way and, as she did, ten charges were dropped to explode at varying depths. But our distance from the submarine was too great to inflict a fatal wound, the best the charges could have done could have been to have shaken her, perhaps badly, with her negative stability."

The submarine was U-704 which, in thick fog, had surfaced to orientate itself. The submarine and the corvette had spotted each other at approximately the same time. Korvetteleutnant Horst Kessler ordered the u-boat to dive immediately to fifty metres. The submarine had submerged by the time Sackville reached

the area but the depth charges she threw out "wracked" the boat. The submarine, however, was not seriously damaged and escaped to Saint-Nazaire

Undaunted, the U-boats persisted with their attacks. The convoy lost two ships, with another two being damaged. In the on-going engagement HMCS Sackville was involved yet again with one of the German submarines – the third time in twelve hours. Lieutenant Eason described this final clash:

"Radar says there might be something in the ground wave, if so it's to starboard," said the navigator. A dark smudge appeared dead ahead. In three seconds it revealed its shape – long and low, high amidships. A submarine!

"Hard aport. Full ahead. Open fire!"

"The submarine was on the port bow, a little more than 100 yards off. The ship was swinging to port – but not fast enough. The U-boat was inside our turning circle; we could never reach her ... 80 yards, 70 yards – broader on the port bow now. At last!

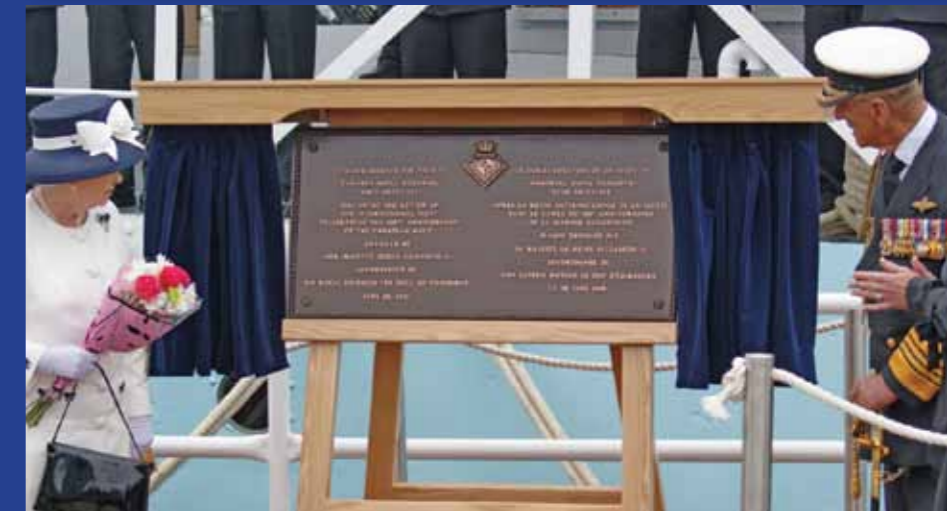
"With the gun on the depression rail and ship swinging fast, it fired at point

ABOVE FAR LEFT: A view of the stern of HMCS Sackville showing the corvette's 40mm anti-aircraft gun. Through displays, artefacts and audio-visual presentations, visitors to the warship can experience a part of how life must have been for those who served aboard a Flower-class corvette during the Second World War. Note the depth charger thrower with the hoist above it.

ABOVE LEFT: The depth charge equipment at the stern of HMCS Sackville with marker buoys on top. The corvettes were generally equipped with four Mk.II depth charge throwers, a pair of depth charge rails and a supply of seventy depth charges. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

LEFT: HMCS Sackville at sea in the North Atlantic during 1942. There were two distinct groups of vessels within this design: the original Flower-class which was a group of some 225 vessels ordered during the 1939 and 1940 building programs, and the Modified Flower-class which followed with a further sixty-nine vessels ordered from 1940 onward. The modified vessels were slightly larger and somewhat better armed. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

BELOW: HMCS Sackville in Halifax harbour. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)



blank range, scarcely a ship's length away. In that instant a gaping hole appeared at the base of the U-boat's conning tower. It was accompanied by a hail of fire from the port point-fives and the Vickers machine-guns. The high explosive shell burst, ripping the near side of the conning tower out.

"She was visibly diving. Another round went out of the gun but went over; her bow was under water. The boat went down fast and was beneath the surface before the fog closed over where she had submerged.

"We straightened out and steamed away before making an asdic attack and called our friend – another corvette – to join the hunt. [But] the U-boat was not to be seen. We searched for two hours without success and then gave up."

The submarine, U-552, was forced to the surface but in poor visibility this, presumably, was not seen by Eason and his crew. Though badly damaged, U-552 was able to escape, returning to Lorient on 15 August.

As it transpired the submarine in question, U-552, had received a direct hit on the conning tower that damaged a shaft which supplied air to the diesel engines. Oil and pieces of debris were seen on the surface of the water and this was reported by the crew of HMCS Sackville.

News of the apparent loss of U-552 caused great concern back in Germany but on 13 August the submarine reached the safety of Saint-Nazaire.

In July 1943, a new Canadian escort group was formed – EG9 – from the

ships of C-1 along with two from C-2, including Sackville. This was a special unit designated to hunt submarines rather than be tied to a specific convoy. That autumn, EG9 was disbanded with HMCS Sackville joining a new group, EG C-2, escorting convoys between Britain and Canada.

After a refit in Liverpool, Nova Scotia and modernisation at Galveston, Texas, Sackville sailed to Bermuda to work up following the refit. She was ready for war again by 29 June 1944, when she sailed with C-2 as escort for HX-297. At the conclusion of this trip she remained in Londonderry for routine boiler cleaning. It was this seemingly innocuous task that would, in the end, prove to be the corvette's salvation.

TOP: Two veterans of the Battle of the Atlantic, Lieutenant Commander Murray Knowles (95), on the left, CO of HMCS Louisburg II (1945), and Lieutenant Commander Bill Murray (91), right, First Lieutenant of HMCS Sackville (1943-44), receive Canadian Naval Centennial commemorative pins from Rear Admiral David Gardam, Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic in ship's Mess. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

ABOVE: On 29 June 2010, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh visited HMCS Sackville during the International Fleet Review in Halifax and unveiled a plaque to mark the significance of Canada's Naval Memorial. The Royal Canadian Navy expanded from fewer than 2,000 regular force members and a dozen ships in 1939 to close to 100,000 and 400 ships by 1945. Nowhere did the RCN and the corvettes play a more significant role than during the Battle of the Atlantic. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)



ABOVE: A recent view of HMCS *Sackville* showing the ship's 1917-vintage BL 4-inch Mk.IV naval gun and Hedgehog anti-submarine mortar. The ready-use shell storage for the 4-inch gun was arranged around the gun platform; cordite powder was loaded separately behind each shell. Note the depression rails fitted around the gun to prevent it being fired into forecastle and the flare rocket launcher on its side. The Hedgehog fired a salvo of twenty-four bombs in an arc, aimed to land in a circular or elliptical pattern about 100 feet in diameter at a fixed point about 250 yards directly ahead of the attacking ship. The lantern structure behind the bridge contains the Type 271 radar. This had a range of twenty-five miles for warships, eight miles for surfaced U-boats, and one mile for a periscope. Note splinter matting fitted around the bridge.

RIGHT: The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust is taking steps to ensure the long-term preservation and professional operation of HMCS *Sackville*. For example, it recently launched the Canadian Naval Memorial Project with the proposal to house the 70-year-old corvette in a fully operational covered salt water graving dock. This would allow year round access to this iconic symbol of the Battle of the Atlantic.

BELOW: A painting by the artist Yves Berube depicting HMCS *Sackville* engaging the enemy during Convoy ON-115. (The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

This was because the cleaning revealed a flaw in her boilers – one was leaking. After repairs it again failed and an inspection showed that faulty construction was the problem. *Sackville's* war was now over. If her boiler had failed earlier in the war it would have been repaired as escorts were badly needed. Now, though, corvettes were in abundance. She may have been scrapped then and there.

Yet, there was one saving grace – *Sackville* had just been thoroughly modernized. Therefore, on 29 August 1944, she was assigned to the officer training establishment HMCS *King's* to serve as training ship. Established in the requisitioned University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, this shore base's main function was to receive classes of

Probationary Sub-Lieutenants of the Executive Branch of the Royal Canadian Navy for several weeks of instruction in the duties of a watch-keeping officer in a naval vessel. On successful completion of the course, each man received his commission as a Sub-Lieutenant and went off to various appointments.³

HMCS *Sackville* subsequently became a Loop Layer, used to position the ring of detection cables around ports, and then a research vessel. By the 1970s, interest was beginning to arise in preserving a Flower-class corvette for future generations. Towards this end various groups in Canada began to search for a suitable subject to purchase for such a role. They eventually settled upon the former HMCS *Louisburg II* which had been sold to the Dominican Republic at the end of the war and renamed *Juan Alejandro Acosta*. However, she was damaged beyond repair in Hurricane *David* in 1979 – and this left just one Canadian Flower-class corvette, HMCS *Sackville*.⁴

Sackville was paid off in 1982, but the following year the Naval Officers Association of Canada took the lead and the volunteer Canadian Naval Memorial Trust (CNMT) was established to acquire and restore HMCS *Sackville* to her 1944 configuration.

Now, restored to her former glory, HMCS *Sackville* is Canada's designated naval memorial and as such she can look forward to a secure future.

The last Flower is still blooming. ■



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We are grateful to the assistance provided by the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust (CNMT) in the production of this article. The CNMT is a non-profit organization made up of more than 1,200 trustees and volunteers. The Trust's main objective is to preserve HMCS *Sackville* – just as she was in 1944. For more information on the Trust or its work please visit: www.canadasnavalmemorial.ca

NOTES

1. Michael L. Hadley, "From a Great Convoy Battle in the Western Atlantic", in the journal of the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, Winter 1986 Issue, p.48.
2. *Ibid*, p.49.
3. By the end of her commission, HMCS *King's* had graduated over 3,100 officers from ninety-six classes. HMCS *King's* was decommissioned in May 1945.
4. Another Flower-class corvette – *Cristobal Colon*, the former HMCS *Lachute* – suffered the same fate in Hurricane *David*. There was at least one other Flower-class corvette still in existence at that time, the former HMS *Bryony* which was in Norwegian service as a weather ship until late 1979, early 1980.

