

*In Peril on the Sea – Episode One*

INTRODUCTION

*By Vice Admiral Hugh MacNeil (Retd.)*



**"HMCS Sackville pursuing a surfaced U-boat"**

In the afternoon of 3 August 1942, while serving as part of Escort Group C-3 protecting Convoy ON 115, the corvette **Sackville**, under the command of Lieutenant Alan Easton, RCNR, obtained an ASDIC contact. Changing course to investigate, she sighted the German submarine, **U-552**, running on the surface and immediately changed course to ram as shown in this painting by John Alford. The U-boat commander, **Kapitänleutnant** Erich Topp, managed to avoid the attempt and crash-dived but not before **Sackville** put a 4-inch round into his conning tower that so badly damaged Topp's boat that he had to break off his patrol. (Courtesy of John Alford)

The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust (CNMT) has two principal objectives: to restore, preserve and maintain HMCS *Sackville* in her 1944 configuration as a Second World War corvette; and to operate this last survivor of the 269 corvettes built, as a Naval Museum for the benefit of all Canadians. This rather small and somewhat battered little ship is the sole remaining example of the 121 Flower Class corvettes built in Canada, as part of this nation's extraordinary war production program. Corvettes were designed and intended as a stop-gap measure to be used as coastal escorts until larger and more powerful ships could be built, but the pace of the Battle of the Atlantic, particularly in the critical period of 1941-1943, required that Canadian corvettes, largely manned by Reserve and Volunteer Reserve personnel, were thrust into the mid-Atlantic as soon as they were completed. By default, corvettes became the mainstay of the Canadian escort fleet and, in the great ocean battles, fought their way into naval immortality.

*Sackville* herself had a distinguished career. She is a veteran of many convoy battles in that generally inhospitable stretch of ocean between Newfoundland, the Denmark Strait, Iceland and the Western Approaches to the British Isles. She blew one U-boat out of the water with depth charges and, somewhat incredibly, badly damaged another with her First World War vintage 4-inch gun. In September 1943, this rust-streaked little warship was an early target of the German acoustic homing torpedo – one of these deadly weapons exploded in her wake and another beneath her hull, fatally damaging *Sackville's* No. 1 boiler. *Sackville*, however, was lucky as in this same action three of her sister escorts, a destroyer, a frigate and a corvette, were sunk in close proximity with only one man from each ship being saved. A fragment of metal from the frigate HMS *Itchen*, which exploded on being hit in this action, landed on *Sackville* and is today preserved as a treasured artefact.

*Sackville* is a symbol of Canada's war effort. In 1939 Canada had a very small population and our national industry, concentrated in a few pockets across the country, was not capable of constructing warships that required technical and industrial sophistication. The six destroyers of the peacetime Canadian navy had all been built in Britain, as were the four large Tribal destroyers (of which HMCS *Haida* is the last and most famous survivor) commissioned later in the war. The critical need for convoy escorts led to the decision to build corvettes, simple and rudimentary warships, in large numbers. Although the Royal Canadian Navy, which grew to a strength of more than four hundred warships by 1945, had many larger and more powerful fighting units, the humble corvette, in the form of HMCS *Sackville*, is the quintessential example of Canada's naval effort during the Second World War and represents the type of vessel in which most young Canadian

sailors served. In many respects she can be viewed as a microcosm of Canada's capabilities in that period.

*Sackville* is also representative of what could be termed the critical role that Canada played in the Battle of the Atlantic – a role too often overlooked. The post-war Canadian navy was shaped in large measure by the experiences of the thousands of young Canadians, from all walks of life, who served aboard corvettes in the Battle of the Atlantic. For many, this was the formative period of their lives and has become the defining moment for the Canadian Navy. For all these reasons, HMCS *Sackville* was designated as the official Canadian Naval Memorial by the Canadian government in 1985 and she is to Canada what HMS *Victory* is to the United Kingdom and the USS *Constitution* is to the United States. On behalf of their nations, *Victory* and *Constitution* are held in trust, maintained, crewed and interpreted by the navies of the United Kingdom and the United States. The major difference is that *Sackville* is owned by the CNMT and, with some assistance from the navy, is largely maintained by the volunteers of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust. How long such a situation can be sustained is moot.

The reasons for preserving this rather humble but important icon, HMCS *Sackville*, for present and future generations of Canadians, has nothing whatsoever to do with the glorification of war. It has everything to do with the state of Canada in 1939, its general unpreparedness for an unwanted conflict, the tools it could provide to its own sailors, and the conditions under which they served. *Sackville* is dedicated to helping Canadians understand how a previous generation of young men and women responded to a worldwide crisis that threatened our security and way of life. Lest the reader think this is an exaggeration, it is worth remembering that many Canadian ships and sailors were lost by U-boat attacks in local Canadian waters such as the Gulf of the St. Lawrence because the Battle of the Atlantic was the only campaign of the Second World War that intruded into Canadian territorial waters.

*In Peril on the Sea* stems from the goal of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust to develop a dynamic, resource-rich, educational web site, for use by high school history teachers and students. The Trust has received much wise advice and strong encouragement for this project from the Nova Scotia Department of Education, from teachers, and from Veterans Canada. In the past decade, it has become increasingly clear to many in Canada that the intelligent study of this nation's history and development is not a luxury but an essential ingredient for Canadians both old and new, to understand who we are, how our nation has evolved, the values we hold dear – and the reason why. Teachers need examples, documents, primary and secondary sources, records, true stories, and facts to incite their students' interest in the study of major concerns which dominated the past but remain pertinent for Canadians today, in areas such as globalization, development and sovereignty. The Canadian navy is part of the fabric of this nation. Its history, struggles and successes are, in many ways, a reflection of Canada's interests, priorities, decisions, resources and abilities over much of the past century, and provide a wealth of material relevant to the study of Canadian history.

Such material will eventually be available on the Trust's educational resource web site but *In Peril on the Sea* will provide an excellent introduction and first class companion for teachers, students and Canadians in general, to the educational web site during its development. A specific example that teachers could use when studying the emergence of Canadian sovereignty is the whole story surrounding the appointment in 1943 of Rear Admiral Leonard W. Murray as the

Commander-in-Chief, Canadian Northwest Atlantic, thus becoming Canada's sole theatre commander in the Second World War. This large area of responsibility was later reflected in the postwar NATO command structure but it did not happen without a struggle. It was gained through the grudging recognition by Britain and the United States of Canada's contribution to the war, and her growing international status. Who can forget the headlines in the world's press, "British and Americans land in Normandy," when one fifth of the assault troops who landed on D-Day were Canadian.

The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust is fortunate to have been able to commission the well-known Canadian historian Donald E. Graves to write this book. Donald Graves not only has many highly-acclaimed books to his credit, he is also a former member of the team which researched the forthcoming official history of the RCN in the Second World War. *In Peril on the Sea: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic* is intended for a general, not a specialized, audience. The author's text contains a brief overview of the RCN's beginnings for the important reason that one cannot fully understand the Canadian role and contribution to the longest and perhaps most cruel operation of the Second World War without understanding the early struggles to establish and maintain a Canadian Navy and that navy's status on the eve of war in 1939. The book contains approximately 65 personal accounts of the experiences of men and women, sailors and merchant seamen and their poignant, first-hand human stories amplify each chapter. In addition there are nearly 200 photographs, paintings, drawings and maps which illustrate both the history of the Canadian Navy and the war at sea in the Atlantic.

This book is largely about the navy and its involvement in the Battle of the Atlantic but it is also worth noting some additional points. The ultimate victory in that crucial battle was only made possible by the exertion of the thousands of men and women on the home front in Canada who provided the tools of war which were virtually non-existent in 1939. The decisive factor in ultimately defeating the U-boat offensive (despite the odds against which the Germans fought, many historians consider the U-boat service the only arm of the German forces that had the potential to win the war) was the crucial role played by the maritime air forces, which closed the mid-Atlantic air gap, and who made life so miserable for the U-boats transiting from their vulnerable bases. There is also the courage and determination of the Merchant Marine. At the end of the war, Rear Admiral Murray stated what many knew – and which should never be forgotten – that the true heroes of the Battle of the Atlantic were the thousands of Canadian and Allied merchant seamen who, despite their vulnerability and the terrors they were subject to, returned again and again to the convoy routes of the North Atlantic. The U-boat arm and the Merchant Marine suffered the highest attrition rate of all the forces of all nations involved in the Second World War. Finally, although *In Peril on the Sea* discusses many of the major Canadian Atlantic convoy battles which resulted in the loss of many merchant ships, it is worth remembering that the primary task of the Allied navies was to ensure the safe and timely arrival of shipping. Between 1939 and 1945, nearly 1,500 convoys crossed the North Atlantic and 98 per cent reached their destination unscathed.

In connection with the subject of this book, I would like to add a personal note. As a seven-year-old boy, I was taken to sea for 24 hours with my older brother in the corvette HMCS *Sorel*. She was based at Pictou, Nova Scotia, for the summer of 1943 where my Dad, her captain, was the senior training officer for the working up (WUPS) of new escorts joining, or

those returning after repair or refit, to the Atlantic battle. The memories of the next day are still vivid. Even now, I can feel the weight of my tin hat, anti-flash gear, life vest, and how the seemingly huge naval binoculars slung around my neck bounced against my knees (I couldn't see much through them then and found many years later, that "pusser" or issue binoculars did not seem to improve). My ears stuffed with cotton wool, I peered over the open bridge during the night as *Sorel* fired depth charges, and then star shell from the 4-inch gun, and "snow flake" illuminants from launchers on the wings of her bridge, as she attempted to light up and locate a "tame" British training submarine on the surface in the dark. U-boats preferred to attack at night on the surface and from inside the convoy screen. Fascinated, I watched as other ships in the training group fired their guns, came close alongside, transferred instructions and received the occasional "drop of detail" over the radio. That was not all. A sailor, one of the cooks, took me fishing; we fired Sten submachine guns and a .45 calibre pistol, (which forever after made me very wary of them); and one of the 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns. The yeoman sent my brother and me messages by semaphore, which we had more or less learned as a cub and scout. I slept for a while in a hammock, drank many cups of cocoa, was stuffed with sandwiches, and finally remember waking up late the next afternoon, with the sun streaming through the open scuttle above someone's bunk in which a very excited but very tired little boy had finally been wedged.

It was a memorable experience for me but a safe and protected one. Now there remains only one corvette left in the world. These staunch little ships, good sea boats that they were, were not built to naval standards and would often sink within minutes of being torpedoed. Their boiler rooms, for example, were essentially coffer dams, where the stokers stood on steel plates a foot or so above the ship's bottom, and often wondered whether the crashing explosions that reverberated around their compartment were enemy torpedoes or their own depth charges seeking a U-boat. For these men there was only one way of escape and that was up a 30-foot, greasy vertical ladder. But thousands of young Canadians spent the war in these little ships which, in the words of the British Admiralty, allowed the Atlantic convoy system to work. All Canadians, present and future, owe a huge debt of gratitude to those who fought the Battle of the Atlantic. They should also be grateful to those who had the foresight and determination, and who have given so generously of their time, skills and resources, to save and preserve Canada's Naval Memorial, HMCS *Sackville*.

Vice Admiral H.M.D. MacNeil, CMM, CD (Retd.)  
*Chair, The Canadian Naval Memorial Trust*  
*Wallace Point, Belmont, Nova Scotia*  
*February 2003*