

**OPENING ROUNDS: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY AT WAR,
SEPTEMBER 1939 – MAY 1941 (cont'd)**

Continued from Chapter 3 Part 1..... On the following night, five U-boats savaged Convoy HX 79, sinking 12 of 24 merchantmen although there was a strong naval escort. It is small wonder that the German submariners termed this period their “Happy Time.”



"Four-Stackers" -- American Lend-Lease Destroyers, 1940

More than 50 First World War American destroyers are crammed into the Philadelphia Naval Yard in this remarkable photograph taken in September 1940. In return for bases in the Western Hemisphere, the USN turned over these aging veterans to the RN and, at British insistence, the RCN reluctantly manned six but this unforeseen personnel commitment added to a growing manpower crisis in the Canadian navy. (USN Navy Photograph, author's collection)

The convoys also faced other hazards. The *Luftwaffe* began to operate long-range Condor bombers from French airfields and they proved nearly as dangerous as the U-boats, sinking 15 ships in August 1940. German surface raiders, either warships or fast armed merchant ships, continued to break out into the Atlantic, forcing, at the least, the widespread deployment of the RN's strength.

These troubles occurred at a time when the Royal Navy, having suffered recent heavy losses, had only 74 operational destroyers – far too few to escort the vital Atlantic convoys, operate with the main fleets, and prevent a possible German seaborne invasion of England. In desperation, Prime Minister Winston Churchill appealed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States for old American destroyers to serve until the RN's wartime building programme provided new vessels, and in September a deal was struck which saw the United States turn over 50 “mothballed” and obsolescent destroyers in return for long-term leases on eight British bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. Included in this agreement, at American insistence, was a clause requiring Churchill to make a public declaration that the RN would not be scuttled or surrendered if Germany carried out a successful invasion of the British Isles. A month later, the first of these veterans arrived at Halifax to be taken over by a British crew.

The seven Canadian destroyers (*Fraser* had been replaced by a similar vessel,

Margaree) were involved in the rising tempo of the naval war in the second half of 1940. They served as local escorts in the RN's Western Approaches command, taking outward-bound convoys from the Clyde and Mersey to a point northwest of Ireland and then picking up inward-bound



HMCS Laurier

Constructed in 1936 for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, *Laurier* was one of the Canadian Government vessels taken over by the RCN at the outbreak of war. This was convenient as the crews of these vessels often came with them, simply switching uniforms. *Laurier* served throughout the war as a local coastal escort between Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia. Displacing 201 tons, she was 113 feet long, had a top speed of 10 knots, a complement of 29 and was armed with a single 12-pdr. gun and one .303 machine gun. *Laurier* returned to the police service in 1946

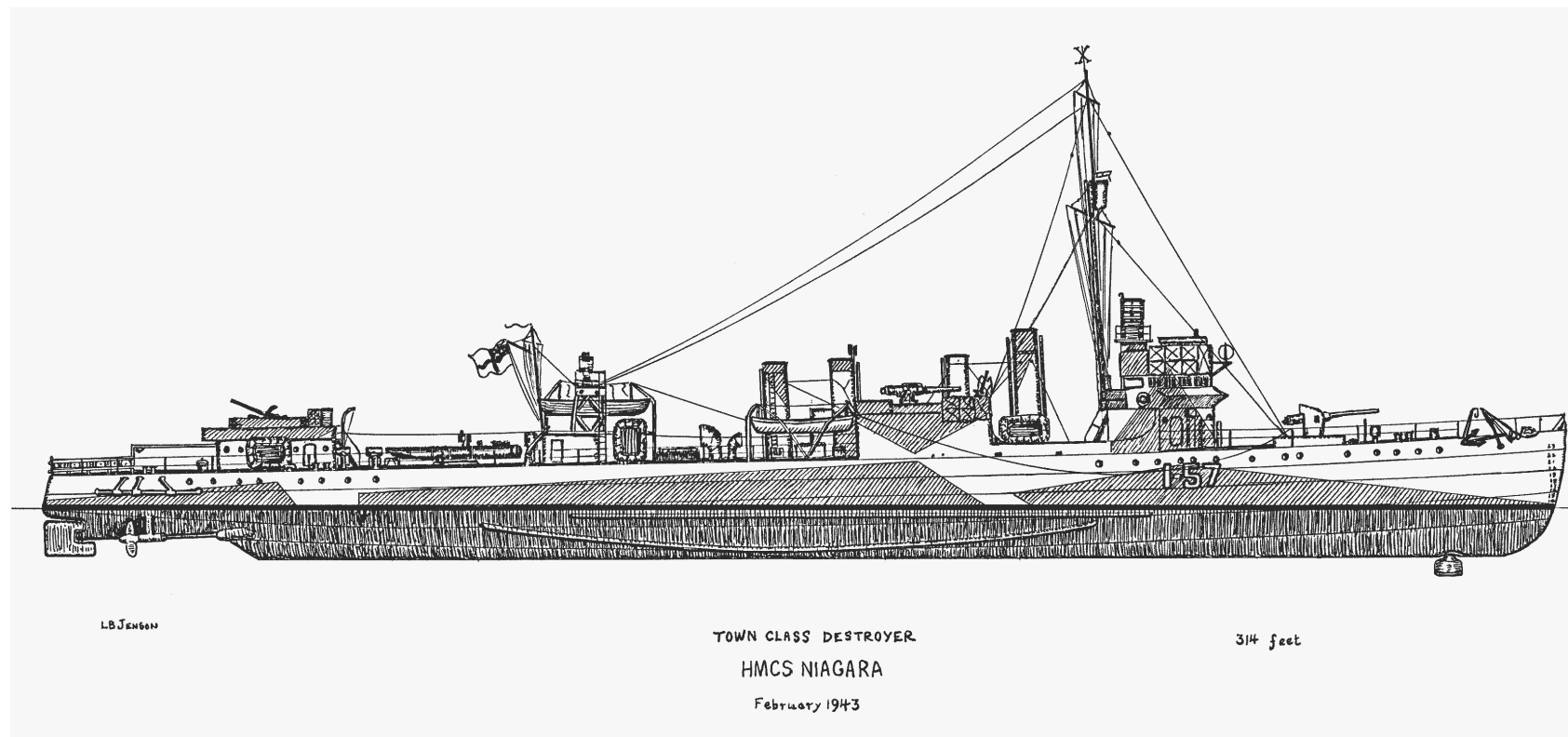


Wearing gun shirts and tin hats, the gun crew of *Laurier* practices their drill in 1940. Originally designed in the late 1890s, the 12-pdr. (3 inch) gun was extensively used during the First World War as the main armament on Canada's extemporized anti-submarine escort force and was brought back into service in the Second World War as the main armament of smaller warships and auxiliary vessels. It was not a particularly effective weapon although it had good range -5000 yards. (Both photos Canadian Memorial Trust)

convoys. On 2 July, *St. Laurent* made a dramatic 84-mile dash to rescue 826 survivors from the liner *Arandora Star* after it was torpedoed north of Ireland – ironically, the 1,299 passengers on board were largely German prisoners of war and German and Italian civilians on their way to internment in Canada. On 5 August, almost 22 years since a Canadian warship had last been in action against a German submarine (and that was the ignominious brush between the *Hochelaga* and *U-156*), Lieutenant Commander Herbert Rayner, RCN, commanding *St. Laurent*, attacked *U-52*, a Type VII boat under *Kapitänleutnant* Otto Salmann about 300 miles north of Ireland and so badly damaged it that Salmann had to limp back to his base. Three months later, on 6 November, HMCS *Ottawa*, under Commander E.R. Mainguy, RCN, and a British warship attacked and sank the Italian submarine *Faá di Bruno* after a hunt that lasted 24 hours. This was the RCN's first submarine kill -although this success was not confirmed until long after the war.

These were the triumphs but there were tragedies as well. In late October, the newly-commissioned HMCS *Margaree* sank after colliding with the merchant ship it was escorting, causing the loss of 140 Canadian sailors – tragically, many of them survivors from *Fraser*. In early December, the

Italian navy exacted revenge for the *Faá di Bruno* when the submarine *Argo* torpedoed *Saguenay*, blowing her bow off and killing 21 men, -although prompt and effective action by the crew saved the destroyer and she was towed into harbour to spend six months under repair. There were now only five operational Canadian destroyers left but they soon received an unexpected reinforcement.



HMCS Niagara, Town Class Destroyer, 1941

In 1940 the RCN took over six First World American destroyers for use as escort vessels and two more were acquired later in the war. These vessels generally displaced between 1,000 and 1,200 tons, were 314 feet in length and carried a complement of 153 officers and men. Originally armed with four 4-inch guns and twelve 21-inch torpedo tubes, their armament was reduced to one 4-inch gun, one 12-pdr. gun, three 21-inch torpedo tubes, four 20mm AA guns, depth charges and, later, Hedgehog. *Niagara* is illustrated here with Type 271 Radar. *Niagara* was the former USS *Thatcher*. She participated in the capture of **U-570** in 1941 and served in the Western Escort Force until 1944 when she became a torpedo training ship. *Niagara* was sold for scrap in 1946. (Drawing by L. B. Jenson, courtesy of the Directorate of History and Heritage, DND)

Problems for the RCN

At the urging of the Admiralty, which was already starting to feel personnel shortages, NSHQ reluctantly agreed to take over some of the old American destroyers. There was no great enthusiasm for these obsolescent warships, which, with their narrow hulls and high superstructures, tended to be unstable in rough seas, traits not offset by their better qualities – high speed and relatively heavy armament. It was a time, however, when any warship was better than none and the RCN commissioned six of the veteran warriors (HMC Ships *Annapolis*, *Columbia*, *Niagara*, *St. Clair*, *St. Croix* and *St. Francis*). Two proved so defective that they were only good for limited service but the remaining four, as crews were found for them, were dispatched in late 1940 and early 1941 to join the five modern -destroyers in British waters.*

The RCN would have much preferred using the manpower sent to these ships to man the new vessels beginning to enter service in late 1940. The first Canadian-built corvette to commission was *HMS Windflower* on 26 October, one of the ten vessels constructed for the RN, and she was soon joined by the other nine, all of which received, as was the RN custom, flower names. Under an arrangement made with the Admiralty, the RCN provided skeleton crews to deliver them to Britain and the plan was that these temporary crews, once replaced by British sailors, would then form a manning pool for the Canadian destroyers on the eastern side of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, the British replacement personnel never appeared and, given the general shortage of warships, the ten “orphan” corvettes were soon escorting convoys despite the fact that their crews were largely untrained. It was a difficult situation that persisted until April 1941 when NSHQ reluctantly complied with a request from the Admiralty that the ten vessels be retained as Canadian warships.

These developments had serious consequences. The unforeseen commitment to man 16 warships in late 1940 took much of the RCN’s available manpower and totally disrupted its plans to recruit and train personnel for its wartime construction programme. The manpower required for these vessels, some 1,700 officers and sailors, may have seemed small to the Admiralty but it was nearly the exact strength of the permanent RCN in September 1939. As the newly-promoted Rear Admiral Nelles explained to his British opposite number, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the RCN’s manpower problems were such that it was trying to make “bricks without straw.”⁵

In fact, in late 1940 the Canadian navy faced an almost insurmountable problem. To meet commitments for new construction, it had to train 7,000 officers and men before the spring of 1941 – including 300 officers of the executive branch, not one of which had yet been entered into the service. Even worse, the training establishments needed for this manpower had not yet been built and even if they had been, there were almost no instructional staff to man them. To add to the problem, the RCN’s best warships were serving in British waters and were not available to provide at least some operational experience for what was rapidly becoming a navy of raw recruits. Sixteen months after the beginning of the war, the RCN was on a disastrous course toward a crisis that was not of its own making but one it could not avoid.