TIME OF TRIAL: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY AND THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC, MAY 1941 – MAY 1942

The Royal Canadian Navy Steps Onto Centre Stage, May 1941
The corvette, designed as a local escort for coastal convoys, became the workhorse of the Battle of the Atlantic in 1941. Seen from HMCS **Chambly**, the corvettes of the newly-formed Newfoundland Escort Force are on their way to St. John's in May of that year. The creation of this force brought the RCN into the mid-Atlantic and marked the beginning of two years of grim and relentless struggle against not only the U-boats but also the elements. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 115350)

Commander Leonard W. Murray, 1940

A graduate of the Royal Naval College of Canada, Murray was a prewar regular officer who took over command of the Newfoundland Escort Force in May 1941. For the remainder of the war, Murray was the senior Canadian officer most directly concerned with the Battle of the Atlantic. A quiet but determined man, Murray strove hard to improve conditions for his crews. This photograph, taken on board HMCS *Saguenay* in 1940, depicts him in a Nelsonian pose that is rather spoiled by the strange headgear. (Canadian Memorial Trust)

The man chosen to command the Newfoundland Escort Force, Commodore Leonard W. Murray, was a professional naval officer who had graduated from the Royal Naval College of Canada in 1912 and served with the RN in the First World War. During the interwar period, he had followed the usual career pattern: shore duty in Canada alternating with sea duty, interspersed with periods of service with the RN. Murray was not a fire-breather but a thoroughly competent officer who always showed empathy for the sailors under his command. He had a somewhat distant personality (he was actually rather shy) but was well known in the RCN as a consummate ship handler – a captain able to manoeuvre his vessel in all weathers with skill and precision. In the Commonwealth and most other navies, ship handling rated above all other officer qualities as it was believed with some justification that good ship handlers were good leaders.

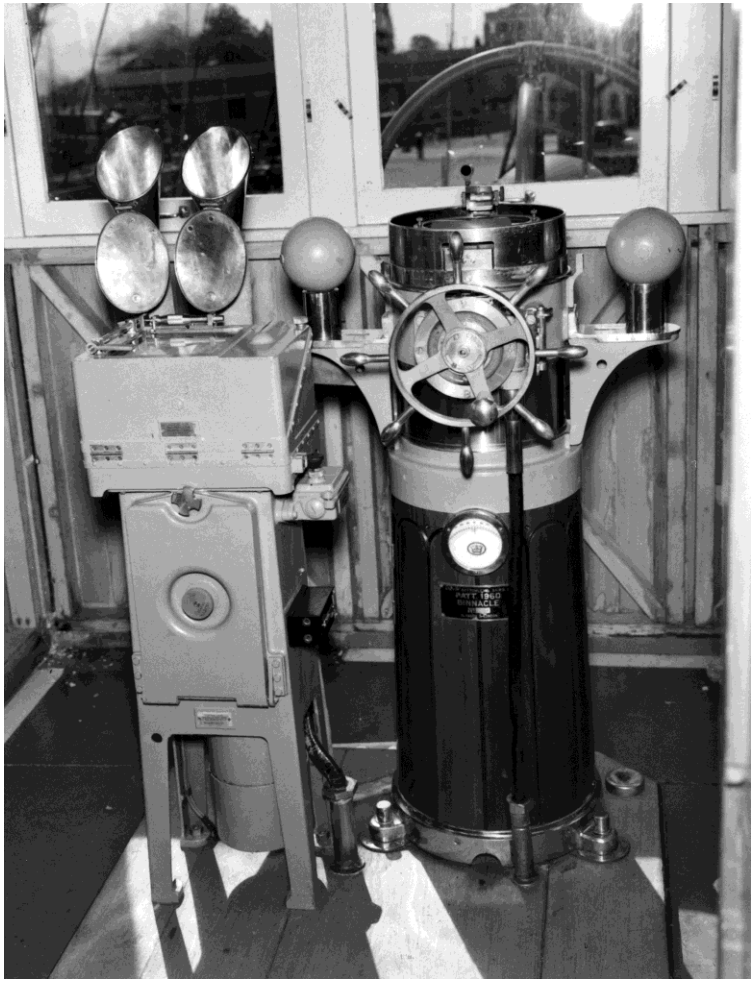
Murray would receive strong support from one of his senior subordinates – Commander James Douglas Prentice, RCN. Universally known in the Canadian navy by his nickname, "Chummy", Prentice was a study in contrast. A native of Victoria, B.C., he had joined the RN as an officer cadet in 1912 and had enjoyed a worthy but unspectacular career, mostly in small ships, until he had taken early retirement in 1934 to return to his native British Columbia. At the outbreak of the war, Prentice had accepted NSHQ's offer of a commission in the RCN at his old rank of lieutenant-commander and first came into contact with Murray when stationed at Halifax in 1940. Murray made him "Senior Officer, Canadian Corvettes," a somewhat nebulous appointment that involved Prentice with the working-up problems of the first Canadian corvettes. In March 1941 he was appointed to command of HMCS *Chambly* and sailed for St. John's in May as Senior Officer of the first seven corvettes of the Newfoundland Escort Force. "Chummy" Prentice was an experienced saltwater sailor, a fine ship handler, an extremely competent officer and a tactical innovator.

He was also a character whose eccentricities made him a popular figure. Prentice wore a monocle, which intrigued his Canadian crew who were unfamiliar with such a device, and one day, during divisions

or inspection on *Chambly*, many turned out wearing a similar appurtenance. A more conservative officer might have taken offence but Prentice passed down the ranks without comment. When the inspection was over, he assumed a position in front of the crew, glared at them fiercely and, with the words "Try this," flipped his monocle in the air with a toss of his head, and caught it squarely between the eyebrow and lower lid of his right eye, not once touching it with his hands. After that, Prentice was the only man on *Chambly* to wear a monocle and, not surprisingly, he was much loved by his crew.

The Newfoundland Escort Force

Prentice and *Chambly* arrived in St. John's on 27 May 1941 with the first group of corvettes. The Flower Class corvette was not really a practical warship for the mid-Atlantic because, although very seaworthy, its short length meant it rode the ocean like a cork rather than slicing through the seas – as a result, in anything but a dead calm sea, a corvette was inclined to be very lively. Its deck was open between the bridge structure and foc'sle, which meant that in even moderate seas it was often awash. Furthermore, the foremast was positioned squarely in front of the bridge, hampering visibility from the bridge, which in any case was not a good observation platform because of its relatively low height. The Royal Navy had already taken many of its corvettes in hand for modifications that would make them more suitable for mid-ocean work but Canadian shipyards, overburdened with new construction, were unable to provide such a service. Even worse, Canadian corvettes were equipped with useless minesweeping gear as it had originally been intended that they would function in a dual role. Their armament and other equipment were on a par: almost none had radar, the latest ASDIC or -radio telephones, and most had unreliable magnetic compasses rather than gyro compasses while their secondary armament consisted of First World War vintage machine guns. In short, they lacked -almost every necessity to be effective ASW vessels and this put an undue burden on the destroyers -assigned to the NEF.



Their crews were willing but raw. In 1941, it was often the case that only two officers on board a -Canadian corvette possessed watchkeeping certificates, the naval "licence" to stand a bridge watch and con a ship. A corvette was fortunate if it had a small cadre of experienced ratings as, by and large, most of the crew were going to sea for the first time and they were going into the North Atlantic, -famous

Rudimentary -- Asdic Equipment on Early Corvettes

The first corvettes were supplied with very primitive ASW equipment as shown here. It included, on the right, a magnetic compass binnacle with a hand wheel to control the direction of the Type 123A Asdic and, on the left, a primitive recorder with earphone jacks for the Asdic operator and officer. This equipment was obsolescent by British standards when it was installed on Canadian corvettes in 1941 but it remained in Canadian use until 1943. It was difficult to obtain accurate information from the Type 123A and such information as was gained was often transmitted by the Asdic officer to his captain on the bridge outside by means of loud shouts. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 136247)

Old Reliable -- The Mark IX 4-Inch Gun
The standard main gun on both Canadian corvettes and frigates was the breech-loading 4-inch gun, either in a single or double mount. Although it dated back to the First World War, the 4-inch possessed good range and accuracy. As the war progressed, fewer U-boats attempted surface gun duels against Allied escorts and the 4-inch gun was used less frequently. This photograph illustrates the weapon on HMCS **Arvida** in late 1943 or early 1944 -- note the rails mounted on the sides of the turret for illumination rockets. Also the caps with ear flaps worn by some of the gun crew, these were issue items in the later years of the war. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 184185)

for its gales, ice, fog and generally bad conditions. They would sail out of St. John's, Newfoundland, affectionately known as "Newfie John" or "Hole in the Rock," which more aptly describes the small harbour with its narrow entrance. There were few naval facilities in St. John's in 1941 and even fewer recreational facilities for the sailors. Things were no better at the other end as, at the completion of a voyage, Canadian ships would go into Hvalfjord in Iceland, an open, windswept -anchorage in barren surroundings.

To control a force that would in the next six months come to include most of the destroyers and corvettes in the RCN, Commodore Murray had a ridiculously small staff. He also came under a cumbersome command structure resulting from an agreement made in March between Britain and the United States which made the United States Navy responsible for the protection of shipping west of a line running between Greenland and Iceland and, in effect, brought the Canadian navy under American control, although neither the Canadian government nor its senior naval officers were consulted about this arrangement. In reality, the commander of Task Group 4, Rear Admiral L.E. Bristol, the senior American officer, whose head-quarters were at Argentia, Newfoundland, only exercised "coordinating supervision" over the NEF and left daily operations in the hands of Murray at St. John's.[1] Bristol proved supportive of the RCN's efforts as did many of his staff, who thought their Canadian counterparts "active, capable and good companions."[2] The Americans concentrated on escorting fast convoys while the NEF escorted the slow convoys.

The slow convoys, unfortunately, were the worst. Composed of old and weather-beaten merchantmen prone to breakdown, they were longer in passage and more vulnerable to attack. The fast convoys, composed of newer ships, were less likely to suffer attack because, although the U-boats could keep up with them on the surface, their speed was such that the enemy found it difficult to make concentrated attacks against them. An additional problem with slow convoys was that, in order to receive some protection from the limited air units available in Iceland, they were often routed to the north on a longer and rougher passage than the fast convoys, which took a more direct route across the Atlantic. Although it was planned that the NEF

would provide an escort group of six ships for each slow convoy, this strength was rarely attained on operations. The slow convoys sailed from ports in Nova Scotia (and later New York) under local -escort to a point off southern Newfoundland designated the WESTOMP (West Operational Meeting Point). Here an NEF escort group took them over and escorted them to the MOMP (Mid Ocean Meeting Point), where they were taken over by British escorts. The Canadian group then went to Hvalfjord in Iceland for refuelling and maintenance before picking up a westbound convoy, which they would take back to the WESTOMP. Theoretically, the ships of the NEF were to get at least a week for rest and maintenance between the inward and outward legs of each voyage but this rarely proved possible.

As if all this was not bad enough, Murray also faced problems finding time and facilities to train his green crews. He had originally hoped that at any given time one of his groups would be exercising under Prentice's -supervision to work their crews up to a minimum level of proficiency, but from the outset operational requirements doomed these intentions. It was not until early September, nearly three months after the creation of the NEF, that Murray was able to provide Prentice with this opportunity.

Busy Place -- The Bridge of Corvette, 1941
The original design of the bridge of the corvette was very crowded as illustrated in this photograph of HMCS **Moncton** taken during her work ups in May 1942. It was another feature of the original corvette design that had to be changed but, in the RCN, modernization lagged far behind the RN. Note the 20-inch signal projector and the twin .50 calibre AA machine guns. Also note the proper uniform of officers and sailors -- this vessel has not yet seen service. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 191631)

The summer of 1941: The Newfoundland Escort Force commences operations

The problems of the Newfoundland Escort Force were apparent when it fought its first convoy battle a week after Murray assumed command. Convoy HX 133, which consisted of 58 ships escorted by the destroyer HMCS *Ottawa* and the corvettes *Chambly*, *Collingwood* and *Orillia* left Halifax for Britain in mid-June 1941. On the 23rd of that month, it was sighted by a U-boat which reported its position and called in other submarines for a group attack. Efforts by the escort commander, Commander E.R. Mainguy, RCN, to protect the convoy were frustrated by lack of radio telephones on his ships, forcing the escorts to communicate by signal lamp. Many signals were not picked up and it proved impossible to co-ordinate the defence of HX 133, which lost six ships and was only saved from total disaster when the escort was reinforced by several British ships.

It was fortunate for the NEF, given its unready state, that, throughout much of the summer of 1941, Ultra intelligence allowed convoys to be routed around known concentrations of submarines and losses were therefore minimal. This was just as well because the NEF was very inexperienced, as was demonstrated by Convoy SC 41, which left Sydney in the last week of August escorted by the ex-USN "four-stacker" destroyer *St. Croix* under Commander H. Kingsley, RCN, who was also Senior Officer, and the corvettes *Buctouche*, *Galt* and *Pictou*. The voyage of SC 41 was a dismal record of equipment breakdowns on three of the four escorts, collisions at sea, naval and merchant vessels getting lost and communications failure, all of which were played out against a background of bad weather, fog, storms and ice floes. More by chance than anything else, SC 41 arrived in Britain without loss, but by the time the next slow convoy, SC 42, set off, the Newfoundland Escort Force's luck had run out.