

## TIME OF TRIAL: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY AND THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC, MAY 1941 – MAY 1942 (cont'd)

*Continued from Chapter Four Part 1 .....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.*

### **The ordeal of SC 42: August–September 1941**

Convoy SC 42 departed Sydney, Nova Scotia, for Britain on 31 August 1941 and two days later was taken over at the WESTOMP by Canadian Escort Group 24 under the command of Lieutenant Commander J.C. Hibbard, RCN, with the destroyer HMCS *Skeena* (Senior Officer or command ship) and the corvettes *Alberni*, *Kenogami* and *Orillia*. For a large convoy of 67 merchant ships, this was rather thin protection and the situation was not improved when SC 42 encountered a gale on 3 September that lasted four days – three ships were forced to turn back, speed was reduced to an absolute crawl of 5 knots while stemming the sea, and fuel consumption increased. Eight days out of Sydney and only just south of Greenland, SC 42 was sighted by U-85.

That boat was deployed on Dönitz's orders. After a summer of fairly meagre results, Dönitz had become suspicious that British aircraft were equipped with a secret device that could locate his submarines. At the end of August he therefore concentrated a large force of 14 boats, *Gruppe Markgraf*, westward beyond the range of aircraft from Iceland, and in the first week of September they were in a perfect position to intercept SC 42. Forewarned by Ultra, the Admiralty routed most convoys south of this peril but SC 42, running low on fuel, was ordered to make a diversion up the eastern coast of Greenland to take advantage of the shorter distance on the northern route to the British Isles. On 9 September, just after it had turned eastward for Iceland, SC 42 was sighted and Dönitz guided the other submarines of *Markgraf* into position. The first torpedoes struck -after midnight from the port, or northern side of the convoy, and claimed the SS *Muneric*, which sank immediately with no survivors.

The port side escort, HMCS *Kenogami*, commenced an ASDIC search and obtained a contact which turned out to be false but almost immediately sighted a submarine running on the surface. *Kenogami* opened fire with her 4-inch gun, but not being equipped with starshell, was unable to illuminate the target and soon lost it. She was then joined by *Skeena*, which steamed back from her position ahead of the convoy to commence firing

starshell but was called away to investigate a report of a surfaced submarine ahead of the convoy. In response, the convoy commodore ordered SC 42 to make an emergency turn to starboard and *Skeena*, taking a short-cut, steamed through the columns of merchant ships to investigate the sighting. Almost as soon as the convoy turned, the leading ships reported a surfaced submarine directly ahead and the commodore, again responding to a visible threat, altered course back to the original heading. Ninety minutes later, another surfaced submarine was reported off the starboard quarter of SC 42 and *Skeena* again moved through the convoy to check this latest sighting.

At this point, the commodore ordered a third course change, now to port, which caught *Skeena* steaming between the columns of ponderous, wallowing, merchant ships. Hibbard (and his crew) had some exciting moments as he steered to avoid collision, and the destroyer was hard over in the middle of a turn when the surfaced *U-81* passed at high speed between the seventh and eighth columns of convoy, totally ignoring the fire it drew from those merchantmen which were armed. It was heading directly toward *Skeena*, now between the seventh and eighth columns on a reciprocal course, but the U-boat commander, *Kapitänleutnant* Friedrich Guggenberger, either brave or foolhardy, opted not to submerge and passed *Skeena* at such close range that the destroyer was unable to depress her main guns to bring them to bear. As Hibbard prepared to reverse course, Guggenberger dived, but *Skeena's* attempts to obtain an ASDIC contact were rendered useless by the turbulence and propeller noise of the nearby merchantmen. Minutes later, two merchant ships, the *Pentland* and *Tahchee*, were hit in succession by *U-652* and the convoy commodore ordered a fourth course change, this time to starboard, bringing the convoy back on its original heading.

Shortly before dawn on 10 September, the *Empire Hudson* on the port side of the convoy was torpedoed, bringing still another course change. The attacks continued throughout the day of September 10 as *Skeena*, *Alberni* and *Kenogami* prowled around and through the convoy, responding to frequent reports of periscope sightings, and carrying out a series of depth charge attacks on faint echoes or none at all – all of which were – accompanied and frustrated by numerous course changes ordered by the convoy commodore. They did manage to damage the Type VII boat *U-85* so severely in one attack that its captain, *Kapitänleutnant* Eberhard Greger, was forced to abort his patrol. *Orillia*, meanwhile, continued to stand by the *Tahchee*, which was still afloat, as her captain, Lieutenant Commander W.E.S. Briggs, RCNR, had failed to receive Hibbard's order for his ship to return. By nightfall, another merchantman had been sunk and the three remaining escorts could only fear that worse was to follow. And it did – a few hours later the *Bulyse* was hit from the port side bringing *Skeena* over to fire starshell but causing the commodore to commence the by-now-standard alteration of course. Minutes later, the *Gypsum Queen* was –torpedoed on the starboard side of SC 42 and *Skeena* immediately steamed to that side to fire starshell in the hope of illuminating a surfaced enemy. The fireworks from this latest attack were observed by newcomers to the battle – two Canadian warships ahead of the convoy – because, fortunately for SC 42, help was on the way.

### **Enter “Chummy” Prentice, attacking**

Prentice had been in St. John's preparing to conduct his first training session when SC 42 sailed from Sydney but he became concerned about the deployment of *Gruppe Markgraf*, whose positions he could follow through the signals received at Murray's headquarters in St. John's. Although he was not planning to put to sea for another four days, Prentice decided to sail in support of SC 42 and, with Murray's blessing, left Newfoundland with his own *Chambly*, a relative veteran, and HMCS *Moose Jaw*, a newly-commissioned corvette with a crew so green that most immediately became seasick as soon they hit the open ocean. While at sea, Prentice received signals indicating that SC 42 was under heavy attack and he steamed on a course intended to intercept the convoy after nightfall on its dark side, which would provide the best chance of spotting surfaced submarines silhouetted against the southern sky.



**Lieutenant-Commander James D. "Chummy" Prentice, RCNVR, 1941**

An RN officer who had retired to Canada in 1934, Prentice joined the Canadian navy on the outbreak of war in 1939 and quickly proved to be an outstanding leader and trainer. Seen here on the bridge of his corvette, HMCS *Chambly*, in May 1941, he is wearing mittens probably knit by his wife as they have his initials embroidered on them. A first class ship-handler and an aggressive commander, "Chummy" Prentice was admired by his crews who delighted in his eccentricities which included the wearing of a monocle. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 151743)

As it turned out, just after midnight on 11 September 1941, Prentice obtained a firm ASDIC contact ahead of the convoy and immediately -attacked it with depth charges. Because of technical malfunction and human error this attack at first appeared to have failed but it did have results as almost immediately the sailors on *Moose Jaw*, following in *Chambly*'s wake, were astounded when a U-boat surfaced beside them and began to move away at high speed.

Lieutenant F.E. Grubb, RCN, *Moose Jaw*'s captain, recovered from his surprise and ordered his 4-inch gun crew to open fire but one of the crew, tense in his first action, made a mistake that jammed the weapon. Grubb pursued the enemy and when he saw the German crew preparing to man its after gun, ordered one of his .50 calibre - machine guns to fire at them. Nothing happened as the gun crew, in their excitement, had failed to cock their weapon. By this time *Moose Jaw* was close alongside the U-boat on its starboard side and struck it a glancing blow. Grubb called upon the men he could see in its conning tower to surrender – in response, he was astonished to see a German make an athletic leap from the submarine onto his corvette and the man's comrades preparing to do likewise. Not wishing to repel boarders, Grubb sheered off and when the U-boat subsequently altered course across his bows, he rammed it. By this time, his 4-inch gun crew had cleared their weapon and they managed to put a round through the submarine's conning tower, at which point the crew began to jump into the sea.

Prentice, in the meantime, had brought *Chambly* up on the other side of the enemy and cleared away a boarding party in a boat to capture the enemy craft, later identified as *U-501*, a Type IX boat. They got aboard only to find that the crew had opened its scuttling valves and refused, even when urged at gunpoint by the Canadians, to make any attempt to save their vessel. The boarding party was forced to join the German crew in the water when *U-501* sank beneath them and one Canadian was drowned while attempting to swim to *Chambly*'s boat. When it was all over, 35 German survivors were on board the two Canadian corvettes, including the athletic leaper, who

turned out to be the captain of *U-501*, *Korvetten-kapitän* Hugo Förster. As Grubb later reported, Förster was not one of Dönitz's best and bravest – not only had he abandoned his crew to their fate but his major concern when brought to Grubb on *Moose Jaw*'s bridge was the Canadian ship's use of searchlights to rescue his men because he feared the light would attract other U-boats in the vicinity.

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## THE IMMORTAL CORVETTE

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The corvette was the brainchild of William Reed, a marine architect at Smith's Dock Company in Middlesbrough in northeastern England. Asked by the Admiralty in early 1939 to design a small escort for work in the North Sea and English Channel, Reed based the corvette on his design for the whaler *Southern Pride*, increasing its size and making some modifications. The RN was satisfied with the result, which they named the Flower Class corvette, as it was relatively simple in design, construction and power plant and could be built in small shipyards that did not normally undertake naval work. The RN ordered its first corvette in July 1939 and over the next five years 269 of these little warships would be built for the Allied navies and would participate in the destruction of more than 50 German and Italian submarines.

Although Reed designed the corvette for a week's service in the North Sea or English Channel, the exigencies of war forced it to be used in the North Atlantic. Corvettes were lively ships even in relatively calm seas, leading to the oft-stated belief they would roll "on dew" or "wet grass" but they were eminently seaworthy although no one who sailed on one would call them comfortable, as they rode the sea like a cork, pitching and heaving with dizzying motion.

### The corvette in Canadian service

When the RCN planned an ambitious construction programme in 1939 it identified the need for a coastal escort/minesweeper. It intended to build Halcyon Class minesweepers to accomplish this role but these vessels required a higher level of expertise than was available in Canadian shipyards and, somewhat reluctantly, the Canadian navy settled on the Flower Class corvette as its auxiliary warship. Orders for 60 corvettes were issued early in 1940 and, over the next four years, a total of 123 corvettes were built in Canada with 111 commissioned in the RCN. There were three major variants:

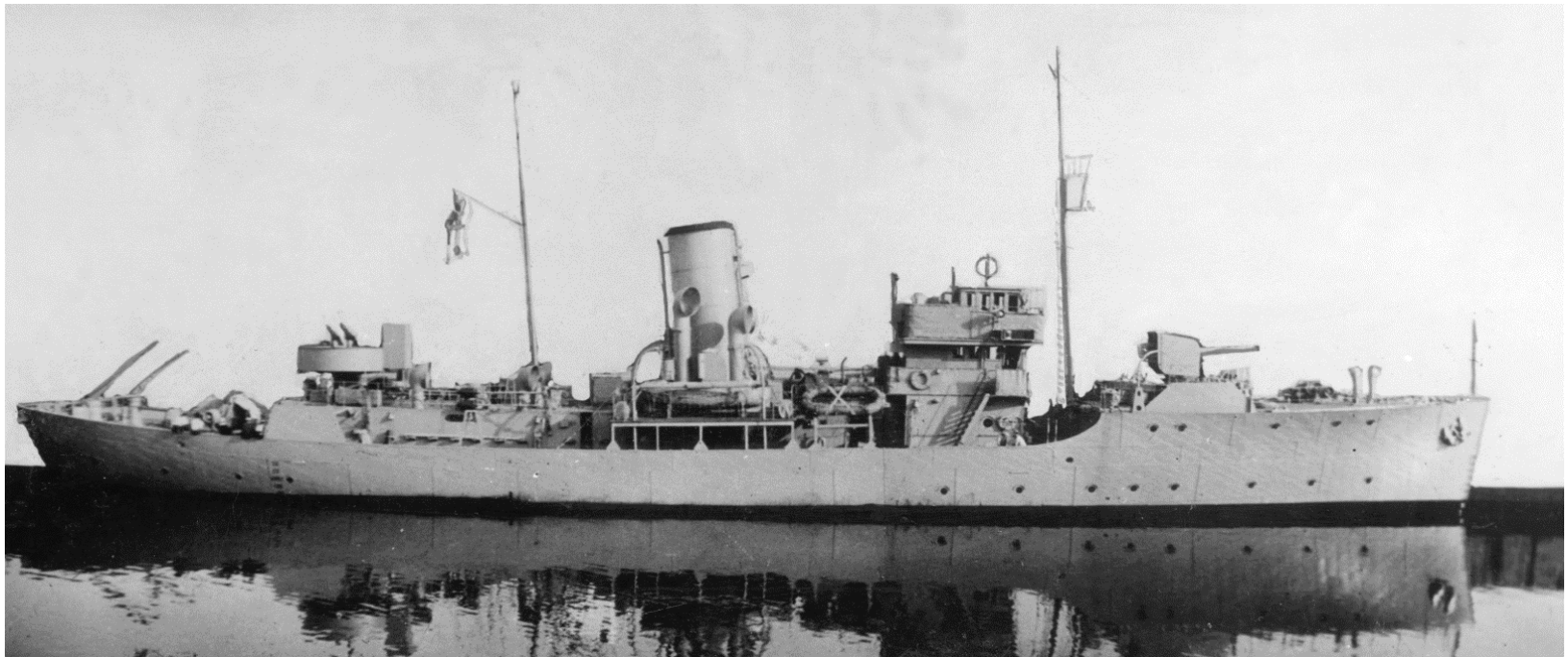
<i>Programme</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Number built</i>
1939-1940	Original, short foc'sle	64
1940-1941	Original, short foc'sle	6
1940-1941	Revised Flower Class	10
1942-1943	Revised Flower Class (Increased Endurance)	15
1943-1944	Revised Flower Class (Increased Endurance)	12

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The first 70 Canadian corvettes were based on Reed's original design with a short foc'sle and a foremast in front of the bridge. Beginning in the summer of 1943, these vessels were taken in hand for modifications that lengthened their foc'sles, re-sited their masts and reconstructed their bridges, although HMC Ships *Brantford*, *Nanaimo*, *Rosthern* and *The Pas* served throughout the war in the original configuration.

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Beginning with the last 10 corvettes ordered under the 1940-1941 construction programme, Canadian corvettes were built with an extended foc'sle and increased sheer and flare to their bows to improve stability and make them dryer ships in the North Atlantic. The final development of the Flower Class corvette was the "Increased Endurance" type.



#### About as new as you can get

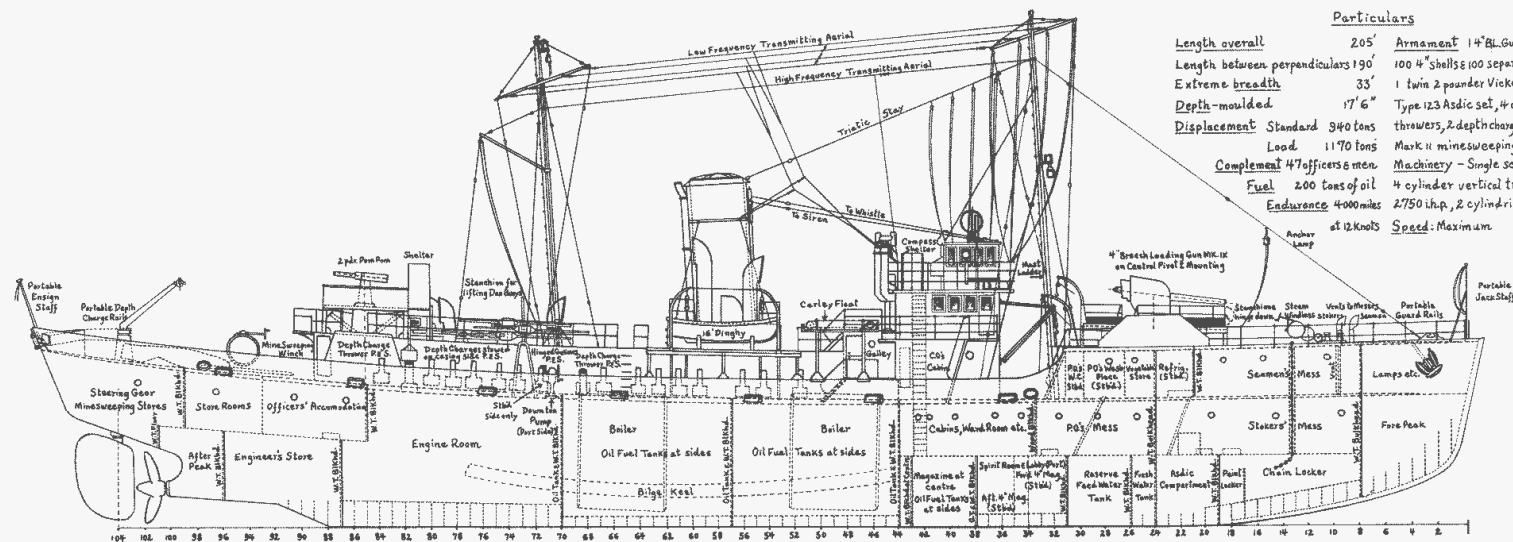
Looking suspiciously like a plastic model on a piece of glass, the corvette *Dauphin* awaits commissioning at the Canadian Vickers yard in Montreal in May 1941. This is the original short focsle corvette design with the mast in front of the bridge and the open well deck aft of the focsle. She displays the builder's coat of mid-grey paint which will be shortly be covered with the Western Approaches camouflage scheme of a white-grey hull and patches of light sea blue and sea green. Unfortunately, Canadian shipyards that built corvettes failed to prepare steel hulls properly before applying the first coats of paint and the result was that subsequent coats of paint did not adhere properly, giving many Canadian corvettes a rust-streaked and battered appearance. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

#### Workhorse of the North Atlantic escorts.

The illustration, below, by Latham B. Jenson illustrates the 70 short foc'sle corvettes of the original design as constructed in Canada from the spring of 1940 to the summer of 1941. The ship is basically divided into three areas: crew space, power plant and an aft space. The main crew space is in the foc'sle area, the forward part of the ship, with the seamen on the upper deck and officers and stokers on the lower deck. The midships is taken up by the propulsion machinery, the two boilers and the triple-expansion engine. At the stern is a smaller space which provided storage and more accommodation that was originally for officers but later taken over by the petty officers.

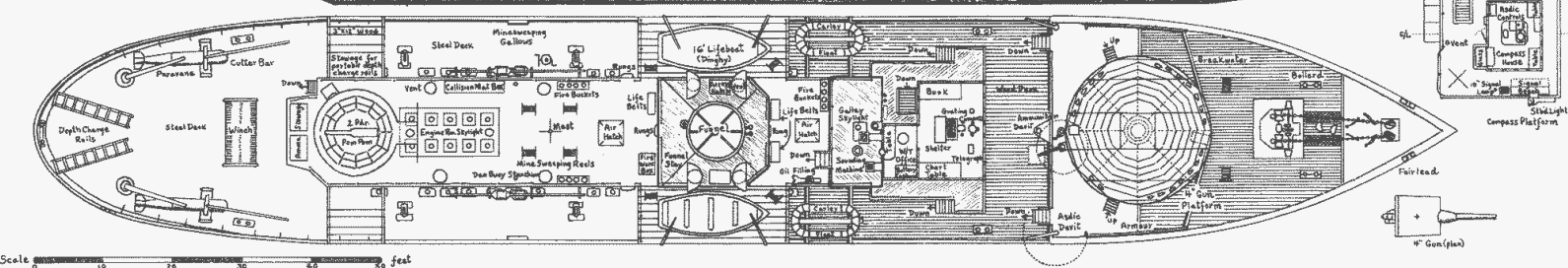
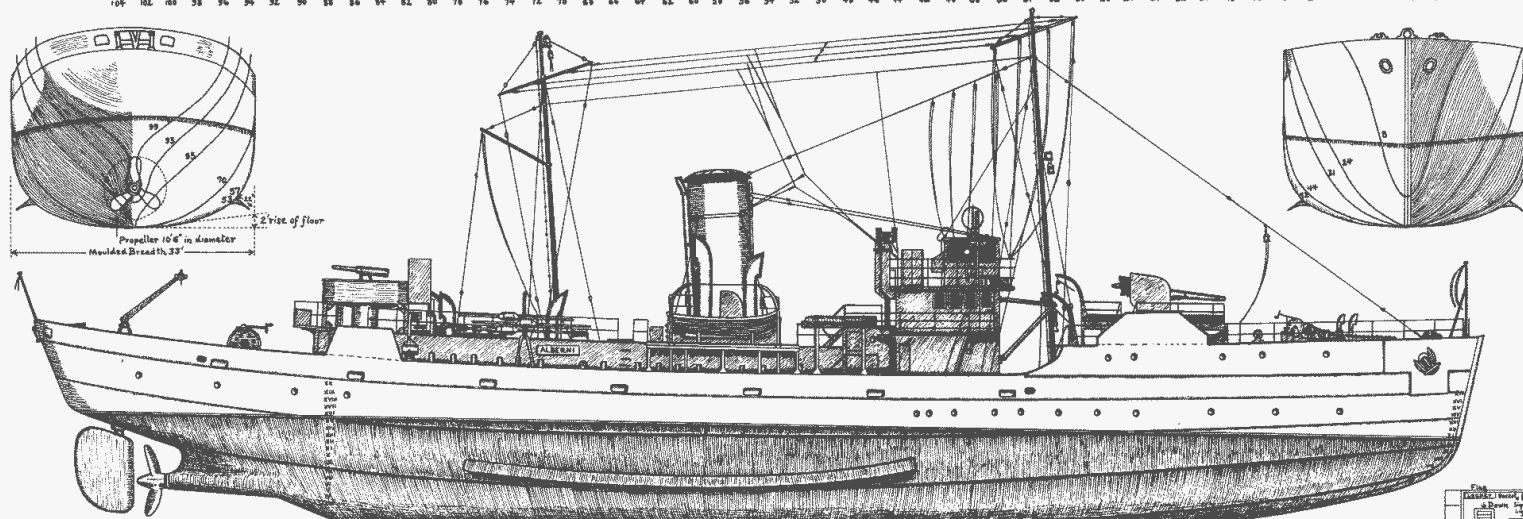
The faults with this design are obvious. The foremast was planted squarely in front of the bridge, which hindered visibility, and the bridge itself was too low and too small. Perhaps the worst feature was the open area of deck immediately aft of the foc'sle which was washed by the sea. The 'messmen' or 'mess cooks' had to cross this space to bring hot food from the galley in the lower part of the bridge structure to the mess-decks in the foc'sle – the result was that the crew's food often arrived cold and wet.

Despite its faults, the corvette was a sturdy little vessel that became the quintessential Canadian warship of the Battle of the Atlantic. It was immortalised in two films, in 1943 Hollywood produced *Corvette K-225*, starring Randolph Scott as a lantern-jawed Canadian corvette commander, and using much footage taken in war time Halifax and on board Canadian corvettes at sea. In 1953 Jack Hawkins starred in the British film *The Cruel Sea*, based on Nicholas Monsarrat's novel of the same name. The last surviving corvette is HMCS Sackville, which is a Memorial and museum ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia. (see the final episode of this series)



# Particulars

Length overall	205'	Armament	14" BL Gun on CP mount
Length between perpendiculars	190'		100 4" shells; 100 separate charges
Extreme breadth	33'		1 twin 2 pounder Vickers Pom Pom
Depth-moulded	17' 6"		Type 123 Asdic set, 4 depth charge
Displacement	Standard 340 tons		throwers, 2 depth charge rails, 4 charges
Load	1170 tons		Mark 11 minesweeping gear
Complement	47 officers & men		Machinery - Single screw (3 blade)
Fuel	200 tons of oil		4 cylinder vertical triple expansion
Endurance	4000 miles		2750 lhp, 2 cylindrical boilers
	at 12 knots		Speed: Maximum 16 knots.



Scale 0 10 20 30 40 50 feet