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

Continued from Chapter Four Part 2 ……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.

"A sad state of affairs:" The aftermath of SC 42

End of a Corvette, HMCS Lévis, 1941
Commissioned in the spring of 1941, **Lévis** escorted only one convoy before she was torpedoed by **U-74** off Greenland in September of that year. Determined efforts by her officers and crew kept the vessel afloat for several hours before she sank, after her crew was removed. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, GM-1463)

The sinking of *U-501* was the only bright spot in what was otherwise an unmitigated disaster. Prentice and his two corvettes joined Hibbard but the increased escort was unable to prevent repeated attacks during the night, resulting in the loss of seven ships. The battle finally ended in the late morning of 11 September when SC 42 moved into range of aircraft from Iceland, but by the time Hibbard and Prentice turned it over to a strong British escort group (5 destroyers, 2 sloops and 2 corvettes), it had lost 15 ships, nearly a quarter of its number.

The disastrous passage of SC 42 demonstrated that the Atlantic convoys, particularly the slow convoys, must have stronger escorts and, above all, air cover. It also revealed that Canadian escorts lacked proper training and that their ships were poorly armed and equipped for the tasks they had to carry out. A month after the SC 42, a British officer stationed at St. John's summed up the effectiveness of the NEF with the acid but probably entirely accurate comment that most Canadian escorts were "equipped with one weapon of approximate precision – the ram."[3]

A particular deficiency was the lack of an effective radar that could -locate a surfaced submarine at night. Unlike the RCAF, which early appreciated its utility, the RCN had been slow to comprehend the advantages of radar, and it was only in the spring of 1941 that NSHQ asked the National Research Council of Canada to develop a radar that could detect submarines on the surface in the darkness hours. The NRC was already at work on an airborne version of the Royal Navy's Type 286 and in commendable time produced a -naval version, the SW1C (Surface Warning, First Canadian), which performed well under laboratory conditions and which began to be fitted to Canadian warships in late 1941 and early 1942. Unfortunately, the SW1C was a temperamental device that often broke down and, worse still, it was based on an obsolete piece of equipment. Just as the RCN started to receive it, the RN began to equip its escort vessels with the improved Type 271, a much more accurate centimetric radar.

Pom-pom,pom-pom,pom-pom
The 2-pdr (40mm) high angle gun which was the main anti-aircraft armament of the corvettes was nick-named a 'pom-pom' because of the noise it made when firing. Basically an oversized Maxim machine gun adopted by the Royal Navy shortly before the First World War, the 2-pdr gad a cyclic rate of 200 rounds per minute and a maximum range of8,000 yards. It could be elevated to 80 degrees and was trained by hand wheels. It took 51 revolutions of the traversing hand wheel to turn the weapon 360 degrees.
(Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

The deficiencies of RCN escorts were also evident during the battle for SC 44 in the following month. This convoy departed Sydney with 60 ships in late September 1942, escorted by a British -destroyer, a Free French corvette and three Canadian corvettes, *Agassiz*, *Lévis* and *Mayflower*. Attacked by five U-boats of *Gruppe Brandenburg* after a chance sighting near the tip of Greenland, SC 44 lost five merchantmen and HMCS *Lévis*, which was torpedoed during the night of 19 September. *Lévis* lost her bows during the attack and her inexperienced captain prematurely ordered his crew to abandon ship but his officers and crew, taking a more level-headed approach, managed to keep the vessel afloat. The next day *Lévis* was taken in tow by *Mayflower* but when her damaged bulkheads began to give way – contrary to standard naval practice, there was no timber on board to shore them up – she sank, becoming the first Canadian corvette lost in action.

SC 48, which sailed in mid-October, also came under attack. Her escort, consisting of the four-stacker destroyer HMCS *Columbia*, four Canadian corvettes and a British and a French corvette, was heavily reinforced on 16 October by American and British warships but still lost

nine merchant ships to *Gruppe Mordbrenner* southeast of Greenland. Ironically, one of the vessels sunk was the Canadian freighter *Vancouver Island*, the former German *Weser*, which had been captured the previous year. The one positive event was that *Columbia*, which had only joined the escort that day, spotted *U-553* on the surface and launched a determined depth charge -attack that so heavily damaged the Type VII craft that its commander, *Kapitänleutnant* Karl Thurmann, was required to give up contact for 24 hours while he carried out repairs. The poor state of training in the NEF again became evident when the corvette *Shediac* missed a crucial signal advising a night-time course change because of a defective radio and sailed off on a lone course into the Atlantic, losing all contact. When the escort commander's report on this incident was circulated to the Admiralty, an unknown British naval officer added the terse marginal comment, "a sad state of affairs."[4] And it certainly was.

"Grave danger exists:" The strain begins to take its toll

By October 1941, senior officers of the NEF were becoming worried about the effect the convoy cycle was having on the health, morale and discipline of their crews. When the force had been created, the plan was that each escort group would have up to 12 clear days after each convoy for rest, maintenance and training. Given the inexorable pressure of the cycle, some groups received, at best, a day in harbour before sailing again – Prentice's *Chambly*, for example, spent 72 days at sea in the last three months of 1941. It did not help that the "rest periods" were often spent in windswept Hvalfjord in Iceland, where there were few opportunities for recreation. At the other end, St. John's, the "Newfie John" of the sailors, was somewhat better as the locals, warm-hearted and seagoing folk, were at least friendly, which could not be said of the Icelanders, who resented the occupation of their country by Allied forces.

The unrelenting pressure took a terrible toll on ships and equipment. To make things worse, when ships from the NEF were sent to Halifax for refit and repair, they often lost trained officers and seamen who were transferred to newly-commissioned vessels, as by late 1941 the RCN's first wartime construction programme was at its zenith. Escorts not only lost experienced crew members; they also had to return to the North -Atlantic with green replacements, which further reduced their efficiency. "Chummy" Prentice summed up the situation facing the NEF in a uniquely Canadian way: "It is as though we were attempting to play against a professional hockey team with a collection of individuals who had not even learned to skate."[5]

America's Spearhead: USS Kearny, October 1941
Three months before Pearl Harbor, USN warships began to escort convoys in the western Atlantic. Inevitably, they encountered the U-boats and, on 16 October 1941, **U-568** torpedoed a "hostile destroyer" escorting Convoy SC 48 which turned out to be the USS **Kearny**. Eleven sailors, the first American casualties of the Second World War, were killed but the **Kearny** survived to limp into Hvalfjord where she is shown here. Fifteen days later, the USS **Reuben James** was sunk with the loss of 115 men, including her captain. (US Navy Photograph, author's collection)

Murray was angry about the constant personnel turmoil in his command, which placed great strain on his few veteran seamen, particularly his ship captains. As he put it, it was "asking a lot of the morale of an inexperienced crew" to expect them "to be happy, and remain fighting fit and aggressive" when they knew that "their safety from marine accident alone," and not from possible enemy action, depended on the ability of their captain to remain awake.[6] One of his staff officers pointed out that the captains of newly commissioned corvettes "have not one other officer on whom they can completely rely;

furthermore many of these ships are grossly under manned, which imposes extra duty on men who are already suffering most arduous conditions."[7] Unless some immediate relief was available to relieve the pressure, this same officer warned that "grave danger exists of breakdowns in health, morale and discipline."

Ride 'Em, Mountie!
The gunshield art of HMCS **Dauphin**, a Flower Class corvette commissioned in 1941 was chosen because her first captain and some of his officers were former members of the RCMP Marine Section. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

At sea, meanwhile, Dönitz began to concentrate his forces off Newfoundland in late October and his U-boats were successful against a number of convoys. On 31 October, while attacking HX 156, under escort by American warships, *U-552* sank the destroyer USS *Reuben James* with the loss of 115 men. In early November, Dönitz had a notable success when he was able to deploy 20 boats from *Gruppe Raubritter* against SC 52, escorted by a patchwork of British, Canadian and Free French warships. Four merchant ships were lost and the Admiralty, concerned that SC 52 would suffer even worse losses, ordered it to turn back to Sydney, making it the only Atlantic convoy during the war to be stopped entirely by the U-boats. Dönitz was unable to maintain the momentum of his attack and capitalize on these successes because, much against his will, he was ordered to redeploy most of his available U-boats out of the Atlantic to the Mediterranean to support German forces fighting in North Africa. This brought a welcome lull in operations for the NEF, which was nearly at the breaking point.

By early December 1941, the complaints of Murray, Prentice and other senior officers had brought some improvement. Murray received enough new corvettes to enable him to form seven escort groups, permitting him to relieve one group for rest and training on a regular basis. His warnings, however, about the problems of raw crews received short shrift at NSHQ which, while it agreed that the situation was "deplorable," felt it was "inevitable" given the RCN's policy of rapid expansion.[8]

And that expansion was at high tide in 1941 – between May and November of that year, 42 corvettes and 12 Bangor minesweepers were commissioned – and there were a further 12 corvettes and 18 Bangors about to leave the builders' yards. This magnificent, but in hindsight, misguided -effort exhausted the Canadian navy's small pool of trained seamen and there was literally no choice, as NSHQ saw it, but to continue to rob - operational ships of experienced personnel to commission new vessels. At the end of 1941 the Director of Personnel in Ottawa summed up the situation with the statement that the RCN "must still be regarded largely as a 'training' Navy" in 1942.[9]

Another "Happy Time" for the U-boats: America enters the war

On 7 December 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war as an active partner on the Allied side. Unofficially, of course, the United States Navy had been involved in the Battle of the Atlantic for nearly four months and had lost one destroyer, the *Reuben James*, sunk, and another, USS *Kearny*, damaged by German submarines. But Pearl Harbor also brought about a redeployment of much of the USN's force from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and by the first weeks of 1942 the only American warships in the North Atlantic were a few destroyers and two escort groups of Coast Guard vessels.

Dönitz took immediate steps to attack American shipping and instituted Operation *Paukenschlag*, ("Drumroll" or "Drum Tap"), a series of patrols by individual U-boats against shipping in North American waters. Unfortunately, he was assisted in his efforts by Admiral Ernest King, the commander-in-chief of the USN, who, despite considerable evidence as to its effectiveness, did not fully believe in the convoy system and did not feel that he had the strength available to implement it. The result was a near disaster – between January and June 1942, the U-boats sank 280 merchant ships, totalling 1,650,272 tons, from the Gulf of Mexico to the coast of Nova Scotia, many of them scarce and valuable tankers. For nearly six months, German submarines rampaged in American coastal waters, at first picking off victims in shallow waters that were illuminated by the lights of coastal towns because there was no blackout in the United States. When the USN introduced the convoy system in one area, they moved to a new area where independent ships were still sailing and increased their tonnage scores. It was with good reason that German submarine crews referred to the first half of 1942 as their second "Happy Time" and their morale was high. One U-boat ace, *Kapitän-leut-nant* Johann Mohr, who sank 10 vessels (8 of them tankers) off Cape Hatteras in March 1942, submitted his report to Dönitz in the form of a ditty:

> *The new-moon night is black as ink*
> *Off Hatteras the tankers sink*
> *While sadly Roosevelt counts the score –*
> *Some 50,000 tons – by Mohr.*[10]

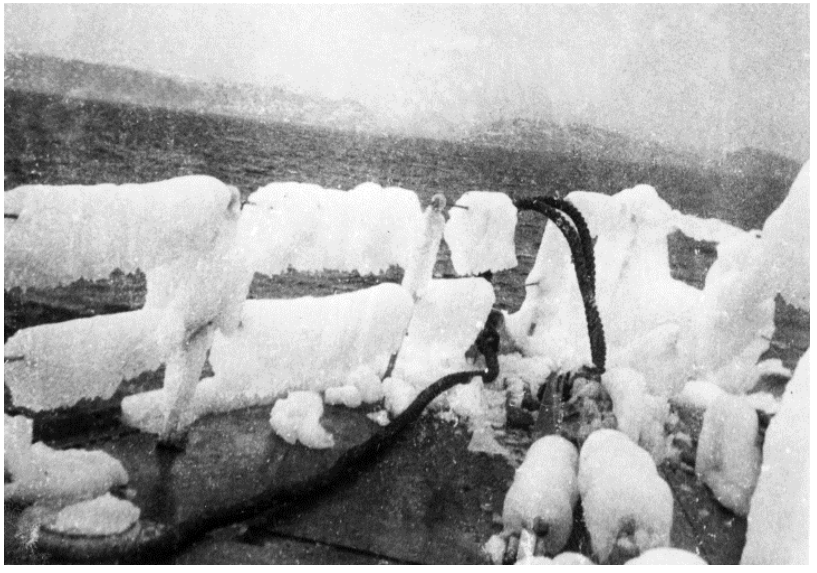
The German offensive spilled over into Canadian waters. In January 1942, Dönitz sent two groups to patrol around Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland with orders to strike coastal shipping beginning on the 13th of that month. While the RCN would have regarded the awful weather in this area as normal for winter conditions off the coast of Canada, the U-boat crews were appalled:

> Blinding blizzards raked the bleak land and seascapes. Thick ice encrusted the exposed superstructures, adding tons of destabilizing weight to the boats. Before diving, the bridge watch had to chip ice from the main air-induction inlet so the valve would seat properly. There was small comfort below; most of the [Type] VIIs had no cold-weather heating systems. One boat recorded inside temperatures of 33 degrees Fahrenheit day after day. Unheated periscopes fogged up to the point of uselessness.[11]

A Dangerous Enemy -- Ice on HMCS Saguenay, January 1942

As this photograph demonstrates, one of the most hazardous perils faced by escorts on the North Atlantic was ice formed when near arctic temperatures caused spray to freeze on the decks and rigging of ships. If it was not immediately removed, there was a danger that its weight would capsize the ship. (Photograph by W.H. Pugsley, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 139279)

LEFT: More Ice
Lieutenant Miller of HMCS **Dauphin** on the corvette's iced-up bridge when she was operating in the Denmark Strait in the late autumn of 1941. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)



RIGHT: Ice, grey seas, barren hills
This photo, taken from the bow of HMCS **Dauphin** in the Denmark Strait in the late autumn of 1941 reveals a depressing view of grey, cold sea and barren hills. Men who were forced into such seas when their ship was torpedoed, had very little chance of survival. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

In a concerted effort the two groups sank nearly 30 ships, almost all independents, but aircraft patrols by the RCAF, which was now becoming more effective, and the implementation of local convoys drove those boats that still had fuel farther to the south to look for easier pickings.

Dönitz's offensive resulted in changes in the deployment of Allied -naval forces that eased some of the strain on the Newfoundland Escort Force. Slow convoys were now routed farther to the south on a more direct run across the Atlantic that brought better weather. A new Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) was created, which combined the NEF, American warships operating out of Argentia in Newfoundland, and British warships. A second new command, the Western Local Escort Force or WLEF, was created at Halifax to escort convoys from that port to the WESTOMP just off Newfoundland.

There they would be turned over to the MOEF, which would take them to the EASTOMP (Eastern Atlantic Operational Meeting Point) where they would be picked up by the RN. The MOEF escort group would then go into Londonderry, Northern Ireland, to refuel before picking up a westbound convoy. By March there were fewer Canadian warships in the MOEF than in the WLEF, which now assumed responsibility for a new series of convoys between Boston and Halifax. This was the beginning of the "Triangle Run," Boston to Halifax, Halifax to the WESTOMP, and back to Boston. The increasing number of German submarines deployed in American waters during the first part of 1942 thus caused a shift in the RCN's strength from Newfoundland to the south.

Until an interlocking system of convoys was instituted from the West Indies to Britain – and this did not occur until June 1942 – the Admiralty did its best to assist the USN fight off the German attack. Britain sent 34 escort vessels to serve on the American coast, co-ordinated signal and -submarine tracking intelligence with Washington, and provided ASW training for American personnel. It was unfortunate that in February 1942 the -

Allies lost one of their most important weapons when the *Kriegsmarine* made changes both to *Schlüssel M*, its version of the Enigma machine, and the communications procedure for positioning U-boats that frustrated Allied code-breakers and stopped the flow of Ultra from naval sources. What was worse for the Allies was that the German signal intelligence -organization, the *B-dienst*, succeeded at the same time in breaking Allied Naval Cypher No. 3, used for operations in the North Atlantic, permitting Dönitz to read 80 per cent of the radio messages transmitted by convoy escorts. At one and the same time, Allied navies lost their most important source of intelligence while Dönitz gained access to valuable new information.

In the spring of 1942, however, although the U-boats were still creating havoc in American waters, the RCN had reason for guarded optimism. Its 16,000 officers and men at sea were serving in 13 destroyers, 67 corvettes and 34 minesweepers which provided escorts for approximately 40 per cent of the convoys on the North Atlantic. As the first great flood of wartime construction had now receded, there were enough ships in service for some to receive rest and training between convoys and the recent re--organization of the convoy system allowed for longer periods of rest and refit. Those sailors who had survived the previous nine months on the -Atlantic were becoming seasoned, while facilities had been built on shore to give recruits better training than had been available in the previous two years. Canadian escorts were still poorly equipped compared to their British counterparts but there was reason to believe that, in the near future, their deficiencies might be made up and plans were in hand to modify the early corvettes to make them more fit for mid-ocean work. Finally, designs for a new and more effective escort vessel, the frigate, had been obtained from Britain and the first of these new warships would soon be ordered from Canadian shipyards.

Unfortunately for the Canadian navy, the most cruel time in this most cruel of battles was just about to begin.