## CHRONICLE OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY 4

# 1941

**"Many men felt strange:" Commissioning with new ships and crews**

*In the first half of 1941, as the products of the wartime shipbuilding programme began to arrive in numbers, the RCN commissioned dozens of corvettes. Their crews were as new as the vessels and most corvettes which entered service that year were lucky to have an ex-merchant marine officer in command and one or two key warrant officer or -ratings who had been to sea before. Lieutenant Commander Alan Easton, RCNR, one of these merchant marine commanders, remembers what it was like to command a new corvette with a crew of fresh -recruits, both officers and ratings, on the vessel's first patrol in 1941:*

Of the three officers only the navigator had been in a ship before. He had been twenty-five years at sea in all sorts of small vessels. He had started to sea in fishing vessels when he was twelve, and had gone on from schooners to small steamers to become master of a coastal tanker. He was a rough and ready little man and a rule-of-thumb navigator, I suspected; not that I was disinclined to be one myself. Of the fifty men, about five had been professional seamen or fishermen and, below, no more than six were experienced with engines and boilers. So with more than three-quarters of the complement as fresh to the sea as the ship herself, it was hard to perform our simple task; hard to keep steam up, avoid the shoals or even to steer a straight course. Had anything warlike occurred there would have been a shambles.

Thus, while we were on patrol, the few who knew their profession taught the others. The principles had been explained to them ashore and our specialists had been well instructed, but when they came to supply their knowledge in the ship, a place where discomfort alone had a dazing effect on the mind as well as the stomach, it did not always work out as expected.

We went at it systematically. I had been back at sea almost continuously since the beginning of the war. I was, therefore, in a fair position to know what was needed to develop the crew.

Boats were lowered many times and rowed and then hoisted; men swung the hand lead for soundings; they put out fires; they were taught lookout-keeping; they learned to read a swinging compass and compensate with the wheel; to stoke the furnaces without belching smoke; to handle the guns in a choppy sea and to throw a heaving line. But all this was not learned easily. ……

The two new officers, the first lieutenant and the sub, were trying hard to learn their practical seamanship a step ahead of the men. Their initial training ashore had given them the edge but it was all terribly new. They probably felt as strange on the bridge with their duty before them as they had when they first stood on the parade ground in their new uniforms.


**The Corvettes Arrive, 1941**

By the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, the massive Canadian warship construction programme initiated the previous year was in full flood and, over the next year, new warships entered service faster than crews could be found for them. This photo of Jetty 5 of HMC Dockyard at Halifax taken in September 1941 shows ten spanking new and recently commissioned corvettes while in the left foreground is **V 250** (also known as **CMTB 1**), a prototype motor torpedo boat constructed in Britain but which did not prove rugged enough to serve in Canadian coastal waters. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 105508)

So the navigator and I split the watches between us, and gave them the beginnings of what was to be almost a war-long course. They took it well and as the weeks went by they began to feel more comfortable; though we were all tired.

But my mind was never at peace. There was much to do, so little time. I was afraid of going far afield with such inexperience; we had to become more efficient.[1]

**"The next thing I knew I was throwing up:" First days at sea**

*Very few sailors who sailed on corvettes ever forgot their first days at sea. Seaman James Galloway, who served on HMCS* Agassiz *of the Newfoundland Escort Force, remembers leaving St. John on his first voyage and his first watch as a look out on the bridge:*

My eyes were aching, as were my hands from holding the binoculars up. It got to the point I could see very little and be sure of it. The motion of the ship climbing up and down each rolling swell got my stomach heaving. The next thing I knew I was throwing up over all that corner of the bridge.

The first lieutenant called me a few choice names and ordered me below to get a bucket and rags to scrub the bridge clean. I fully understood I should clean up the mess I had made, but to scrub all the bridge gratings while at sea seemed more punishment than fit the crime. The other lookout offered to help me, but he was told off and directed to sweep my sector as well as his own. I went below and got two buckets and cleaning equipment. I spent the rest of the dog watch scrubbing with one bucket and throwing up in the other bucket.

On leaving the bridge, I was completely demoralized, cold, and sick. In the mess-deck, the smell of food made me sicker. I went back outside to stand at the break of the forecastle, throwing up over the side from time to time. When I returned to the mess-deck, I laid down on the footlockers and slept until time to go on watch again. I took a bucket with me. I used it a lot, I might add.[2]

*Signalman George Rickard of the corvette* Dauphin *had a similar experience:*

I was on the bridge as a standby at the flag locker on leaving port. Soon the quartermaster piped "duty watch to sea stations" and at the same time we hit the land swells. That was it. Down off the bridge over to the lee side to join about a dozen others in spewing our guts into the Atlantic. …… I heaved up until nothing came but green bile. A real salty able seaman heading for the forward mess-deck made the comment that it wouldn't do me any harm, but if I brought up a red ring to push it back down my throat as that would be my asshole.[3]

**An "East Coast Port" Full of Shipping**
This photograph shows Bedford Basin, the extension of Halifax harbour and one of the largest and best deep water ports in the world, full of merchant vessels. The first convoy sailed from Halifax for Britain a few days after war began in September 1939 and for the next six years, convoys left at regular intervals from what wartime censors called "an east coast port." Halifax was also the RCN's major wartime base but few Canadian sailors liked the overcrowded city with its limited opportunities for recreation. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, HS-1106-15)

## "Every time the doctor took a slice or two:" Air attack, April 1941

*If a small warship engaged in combat, there was a chance that its Sick Berth Attendant, or medical orderly, would be called upon to render assistance. Lieutenant Barry O'Brien, RCNVR, of HMCS* Trillium *recorded one such instance after that corvette was strafed by a German aircraft in April 1941. One of O'Brien's sailors, Seaman Donald Robertson, was badly wounded and, when the attack was over, O'Brien and another sailor*

half-dragged and half-carried Robertson to the forward mess-deck. It was not a pretty sight. There were 11 wounded men. Shrapnel causes blood to flow pretty freely and the mess-deck was awash with blood mixed with the collection of sea-water that had come down the companion-way.

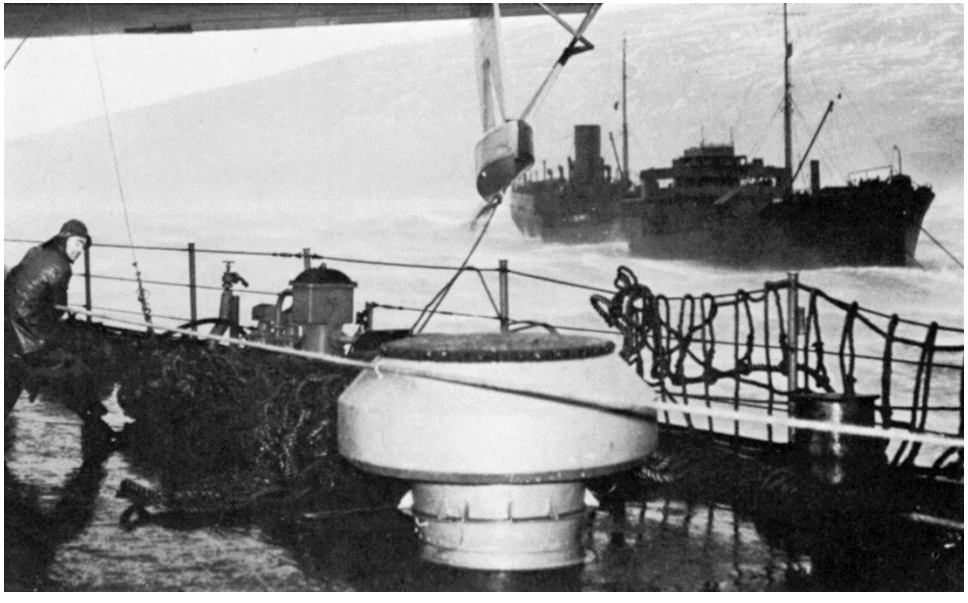
Harry Rhoades was our cook, and also doubled as sick berth attendant, having had a first aid course at Ogilvy's department store in Montreal. He and I did our best to make the injured comfortable. I went to the bridge and detailed the situation to the captain. As we had no doctor aboard in those early days, he immediately closed the senior officer, an RN Destroyer. By bosun's chair, they sent their surgeon-lieutenant over, with books and medical equipment in a canvas bag.

He surveyed the scene in the seamen's mess-deck and I remember him saying: "There are two too far gone to save, eight probably will survive if they can get hospital treatment ashore soon and I will have to amputate the left arm of one if he is to have any chance of survival." The doctor administered painkillers to the wounded.

We strapped the unconscious Robertson to the mess-deck table as the ship was rolling considerably. The doctor took out a book and turned to the chapter on amputations. He then inquired who would administer the anaesthetic. Nobody else volunteered, so I said I would. The patient was stripped to the waist. The operation began, with our cook assisting and I acting as anaesthetist. Every time the doctor took a slice or two, he would turn a page in his book. Every now and then I would be told to squirt a couple more drops of ether on the mask covering the patient's face and the fumes wafting up were making me dizzy and nauseous. As the doctor cut deeper, you could see how the shrapnel had shattered Robertson's shoulder, imbedding pieces of the grey duffel coat two or three inches into his body.

Robertson was fighting for his life, with his chest giving mighty heaves. The operation took about two hours. Unfortunately, Robertson died on the messdeck almost simultaneously with the final removal of his arm.

The doctor left and went down to the wardroom where I found him later, lying prone on the settee. I told him he had done all he could. He - answered that he was fresh out of medical school and this was the first operation he had ever performed. And if it hadn't been for the calming - influence of the cook he would have panicked a couple of times, he said.[4]



**Hvalfjord -- No Refuge for Man or Ship**
In 1941-1942 the ships of the Newfoundland Escort Force went to Hvalfjord in Iceland to refuel before taking on the escort of westbound mid-ocean convoys. Hvalfjord was a barren, windswept anchorage famous for its storms as this photograph, taken from the deck of an American ship, aptly illustrates. Gale force winds are threatening to blow the merchant vessel off her anchors and put her in danger of running aground and breaking up. There was great cheering when the RCN refuelling base was switched from Iceland to Londonderry in Northern Ireland in 1942. US Navy Photograph, National Archives of the United States.

**"Go and start a Naval College:" Meanwhile, back on shore**

*As the RCN went through a major expansion in 1940-1941, there was a desperate shortage of training facilities on shore, particularly in Halifax. Lieutenant Owen Robertson, RCNR, remembers the genesis of the Canadian naval officers' training academy in 1941:*

As I was walking down to the Dockyard, a staff car passed. It was old "Jetty" Jones – -Admiral Jones who, I think, was a captain then. [This officer was Captain G.C. Jones, RCN, Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast] He leaned out the window and yelled, "Robertson! What are you doing?" I told him and he said, "Come and see me."

I went to his office in fear and trembling, because old Jetty had quite a temper, and I figured I'd done something wrong again. When he heard what I was doing, he said, "Forget that. Go and start a Naval College." I asked, "Where, sir?" He yelled at me, "If I knew where, I'd do it myself." I asked, "For how many, sir?" He yelled at me, "If I knew that, I'd do it myself!" So I went off to start a Naval College.

I looked at a couple of universities, Acadia in Wolfville and St. Mary's. Then I heard about King's, an Anglican college on the Dalhousie campus. I met old Canon Walker; he had only about eighteen or twenty students for the coming year for the Anglican Church. So I rented the place on my signature, without any authority from anybody. They moved their students across to Pine Hill and we started a Naval College and named it HMCS *Kings* – without the apostrophe. ……

I think it wasn't more than about three months before we graduated the first 196 engineers, paymasters and executives [executive branch officers].[5]


**In Which They Served -- HMCS Battleford, November 1941**
A classic corvette photograph, HMCS **Battleford** shows her bottom in a rough sea in November 1941. Note that her stern is also under water. **Battleford**, commissioned in July 1941, served in the mid-Atlantic from July 1942 to May 1943 before joining the Western Local Escort Force. She shared in the destruction of **U-356** in December 1942. **Battleford** was sold to the Venezuelan Navy in 1946 and wrecked in 1949. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 115381)

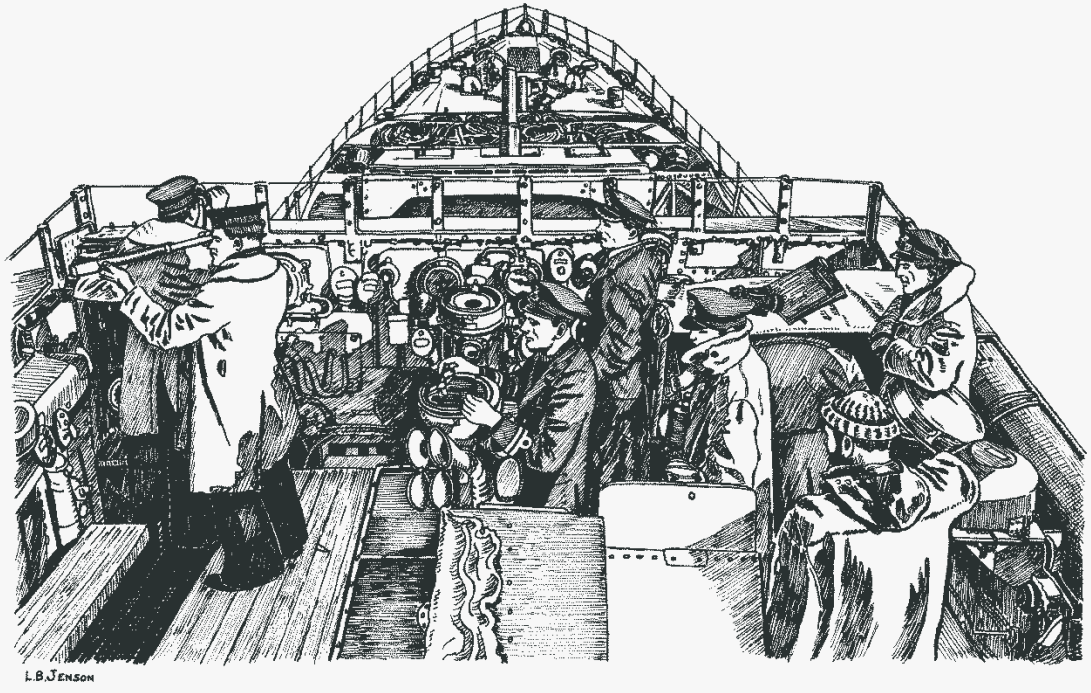
## More bad weather: Hurricane at sea, August 1941

*In 1941, newly-constructed corvettes were sent straight to sea, manned by green crews who had never been in the North Atlantic before. Sick Berth Attendant Stanley Mosher remembers his first voyage in the corvette, HMCS* Orillia*:*

It was late August, 1941, not a good time of year for a first trip across the North Atlantic. For the first two weeks, I slept little, ate practically nothing and was constantly seasick. Two metal boxes stuffed with assorted bandages, splints, pills and potions served as my sick bay, plus my trusty medical book.

I was still sick as a dog until we hit a hurricane south of Iceland. …… Sometime during the three day nightmare, I acquired my sealegs. I found out later I wasn't alone in my terror, the crews in the engine room and boiler room had to stay there throughout the storm. It would have been suicide to venture on the upper deck. The Officer of the Watch and the signalman who stood their watch on the open bridge were lashed to their post by the two coming off watch. The bridge and wheelhouse crews could travel internally from their respective messes to their posts. The crews of the engine and boiler rooms couldn't.

We lost sight of the convoy and most of the escort group. The ships were scattered over miles of ocean. I wasn't sure whether they or we were lost. …… When the storm finally abated the only ship in sight was the corvette *Agassiz*, our senior ship.[6]




**Bridge of HMCS Ottawa, 1941**
This drawing by a former crew member depicts the bridge of the destroyer, HMCS **Ottawa**, as it might have appeared in the autumn of 1941. Warship bridges were crowded places and they were also open, which made them very cold place to be in most seasons of the year on the Atlantic. Drawing by L.B. Jenson, courtesy of the artist

**"It was hell:" Convoy SC 42, September 1941**

*SC 42, outward bound to Britain from Sydney, Nova Scotia, was attacked by a U-boat pack over a three-day period in early September and its outnumbered Canadian escorts were unable to prevent the loss of nearly a quarter of its ships.. Ordinary Seaman Leonard Lamb of HMCS* Orillia, *one of the escorts, remembered SC 42:*

For the next 72 hours it was hell. Part of our job was picking up survivors and we ended up with an abundance, along with a German shepherd dog and two cats. The dog understood Spanish only, and when we dropped charges he would hide under the table in the forward mess and someone had to clean up.

We rescued survivors from the *Stargard*, which looked like a pre-World War I freighter. As each survivor came over the side, one of us would take him into the mess-deck, strip him bare, clean him up and give him dry clothing.

My survivor was a little man, I finally found out after I got him stripped. Now this is hard to believe, but I will list his clothes as I took them off: one life-belt, one duffel coat, one overcoat, one complete suit, two sweaters – out of which jumped a gorgeous orange cat, one flannel shirt and two suits of wool underwear. Many of this crew

were dressed this warmly.

This man spoke very little English and I had a hard time convincing him to get in my hammock. We did this to get them out of the way. But every time I went on watch, this man would go with me and roundly curse out the enemy.[7]

*One of the few bright moments in the disaster was the sinking of U-501 by the corvettes* Chambly *and* Moose Jaw *on 10 September. Lieutenant F.R. Grubb, RCN, commanding* Moose Jaw, *described what happened when the submarine unexpectedly surfaced beside his ship and the German crew emerged onto its deck:*

At one time four of the submarine's crew made a determined move to the after gun. As our own gun was still jammed, no action could be taken except to increase speed and try to ram before they could fire. This I did, although the chance was small, but, fortunately, someone on the conning tower ordered them back. The .5 inch [.50 calibre] machine guns were bearing at the time, but when the trigger was pulled, they failed to fire. A subsequent check showed no defects, so I assume that in the excitement the crew failed to cock them.

I managed to go alongside the submarine, starboard side to, and called on her to surrender. To my surprise, I saw a man make a magnificent leap from the submarine's deck into our waist and the remainder of the crew move to do likewise. Not being prepared to repel boarders at that moment, I sheered off. The submarine altered course across my bows and I rammed her. …….

The gun being cleared by that time I opened fire again. The crew jumped into the sea as soon as the first round went, and I ordered fire to be stopped. I subsequently learned that the shell had passed low enough over the conning tower to knock down the men who were standing thereon. ……

The man who I had seen jump on board turned out to be the submarine's commanding officer. He was badly shaken and when he was brought to me on the bridge appeared to be worried at the amount of light we were showing in order to pick up survivors.[8]

**Wrapped Up**
Lieutenants Bouchard (left) and Wennburg of HMCS **Dauphin** pose for the camera while working in near-Arctic conditions in the Denmark Strait in the late autumn of 1941. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

*The destruction of U-501 was the high point of Convoy SC 42 and, for the next three days, few men in the crews of its beleaguered escorts got much rest – Lieutenant W.H. Willson, RCN, of HMCS* Skeena *remembers the effect:*

I was so God damn exhausted I could hardly think straight. …… I'd been up for the first and the middle [watches] and I had to go on the morning and I'd probably have to get up for an alarm, at nine o'clock [that] morning. A series of sinkings and continuous ringing of that *bloody* [alarm] bell. Get out of your cart and come up. People don't realize there is a point at which you cease to function with any rational approach at all. You're just going through the motions and that's what you can do to a crew if you take them and put them at action stations, run them around for an hour, send them below, twenty minutes later, call them to action stations again; and that's how fast ships were going up, one goes up here, one goes up there. By that time you had submarines in the middle of the fleet [convoy], firing out in all directions.[9]

**Rolling on wet dew: Life on corvettes**

*Corvettes had a reputation for being lively vessels that would "roll on wet dew" and this could make the crew's livingspaces or messdecks very uncomfortable. Life on a corvette mess-deck in the North Atlantic has been well described by Lieutenant James Lamb, RCNVR:*

Into two triangular compartments, about 33 feet by 22 feet at their greatest dimensions, are crammed some sixty-odd men; each has for his living space – eating, sleeping, relaxing – a seat on the cushioned bench which runs around the outside perimeter of each mess-deck. There is a locker beneath the seat for his clothing, and a metal ditty-box – something like an old-fashioned hatbox – holds his personal things in a rack above. The space where he swings his hammock – carefully selected by the older hands and jealously guarded – is 18 inches beneath the deck-head, or another hammock, which were slung in tiers between stanchions and between pipes, wherever there is room. Most of the mess deck space is taken up with scrubbed deal tables, one to each mess, where you eat or write or play interminable games of cards.

Crowded in harbour and stuffy, the mess-decks at sea are like some vision of Hades. There is -absolutely no fresh air; all the ports [portholes], open in harbour, are dogged down and blanked over at sea, and in heavy weather even the cowl ventilators from the upper deck have to be sealed off. Dim emergency lights, red or blue, provide the only illumination in the dark hours, and around the clock there is always at least one watch trying to catch a few hours of oblivion, while about them the life of the mess goes on: men coming and going from outside, or snatching a meal before going on watch. With the hammocks slung, there is hardly room anywhere to stand upright, and there is moisture everywhere – water swirling in over the coamings when the outside doors open, sweating from the chilled steel of the ship's side, oozing from the countless pipe joints and deck-welds and rivets and deck openings, and all the other manifold places where water forces an entrance from the gale outside.

Plunging into a head sea, the noise and motion in the foc'sle must be experienced to be believed; a constant roar of turbulence, wind, and water, punctuated by a crashing thud as the bow bites into another great sea, while the whole world is uplifted – up, up, up – only to come crashing down as the ship plunges her bows over and downward, to land with an impact which hurls anyone and anything not firmly secured down to the forward bulkhead. With a rolling, corkscrew motion, the nightmare world of the foc'sle starts to climb again, up, up, up … in their navel pipes, the twin anchor cables rattle and clank at each movement, a dominant note in the endless, maddening, din.[10]

*Rough weather could make life very difficult as Signalman Howard Cousins of HMCS* Algoma *remembered:*

The ship was your home and the weather had a direct effect on the degree of comfort that home provided. When the wind and the seas built up, the comforts of your home were virtually non-existent. As the ship rolled and pitched, you were thrown around continuously, not daring to move without holding fast to something. The bridge was wet with spray, sometimes solid water. ……

A corvette on the crest of a wave could have one-third of the forward portion clear of the water. As the ship rolled and dropped down into the trough, it was almost a free fall. The poor blokes in the forecastle felt virtually weightless; anything on the lockers, shelves and tables, including your meal, frequently floated off. When the ship smashed back into the next wave, it felt as if the ship had been dropped on concrete. ……[11]

**Medical matters on a corvette**

*The larger warships in the RCN usually had a doctor on board but the smaller vessels only had an SBA (Sick Berth Attendant) a sailor with rudimentary medical training. The SBA, called "Tiffy" in sailor's slang, was not only responsible for the general health of the crew at sea but was also called on to provide medical treatment for combat casualties or survivors. If there was not a doctor present among the warships escorting a convoy, the SBA had to rely on his own training and resources to treat his patients.*

*SBA Stanley Mosher remembers his duties on board a corvette in 1941 and demonstrates that he had a working knowledge of human psychology:*

During the day I'd spend as much time as possible in the mess-deck in case I was needed. Since my supplies were there, it seemed the logical place to be. Besides, I could catch up on my sleep after the depth charge watch. As a matter of fact, they didn't come to see me when they cut themselves, unless it was very bad. One such case involved a man who cut his finger while on watch but it had stopped bleeding by the time he came off so he didn't think it was worth bothering me about. About a week later he came to me with a badly infected finger and a sore arm. First, he got a "blast" from me for not reporting sooner, I then told him he had "blood poisoning." His finger was badly swollen, red streaks ran up his arm. The lymph glands in his armpit were tender, swollen and hard. After several days of Epsom salts and glycerine poultices along with sulpha drugs he started to improve.

On one trip, a young seaman who was a pain in neck to everyone, was always complaining about something. Nearly every day he would come to see me with something wrong with him. I couldn't just ignore him in the off chance that he did have a good reason. One day he had the complaint I had been waiting for. He was constipated. As before, I followed proper medical procedures, then prescribed two cascara tablets to be taken with a medicine glass full of "jollop," a clear thick liquid that we referred to as "liquid dynamite." The following day he came to me saying he had the "runs" and couldn't get too far away from the "head;" could I give him something to stop it. Acting very serious and professional I told him the same thing that got him started would also stop it, so I repeated the treatment. Probably not a good practice, but I was reasonably sure that he was in good health. I knew he'd be busy for a couple of days, so I had some of the lads keep an eye on him and keep me posted. They told me he had frequent trips to the head for three days after the second treatment. He never came back to me for anything trivial again. To the best of my knowledge, he was never constipated again, not in my ship anyway.[12]

*Mosher recalls the time when his corvette rescued fourteen badly-injured survivors from a life boat:*

All my previous medical training was put to the test. The survivors were all suffering from exposure, some were seriously injured. How they survived is a mystery.

One man had a badly fractured leg and some small wounds: another had been blown through a space between two bulkheads studded with bolt ends, a space he couldn't possibly go through otherwise. He had huge patches of flesh missing as if some had clawed out handfuls of meat. All I could do for him was to clean the wounds and apply large first field dressings and make him as comfortable as possible. The man with the broken leg was in a lot of pain, so he got morphine. It was a bad break, you could see the jagged ends of the bone under the skin. They hadn't come through so I set the leg using a Thomas splint to pull the bones into normal position and splints at the fracture, supporting the leg its full length using triangular bandages. Another man had broken ribs and possible back injuries. Taping his chest to minimize movement of the ribs and placing him in a Neil-Robertson bamboo stretcher I then had him placed on a locker and had a piece of canvas (someone's spare hammock) nailed in place so he couldn't roll around with the ship's movements.

Another man had a large scalp wound, about five inches long and down to the bone. This was cleaned, hair around the wound removed and the wound sutured in a manner to permit drainage.

At the busiest time I had lots of help until the action bell went, even the officers were running errands for me and getting morphine from the wardroom safe. I couldn't have asked for better cooperation. All the work was done in the seamen's mess using their table to operate on. We had a great crew.[13]

**"Few admitted they were often frightened:" Convoy SC 48, November 1941**

*In November 1941, Convoy SC 48, escorted by a patchwork group of British, Canadian and French vessels lost 9 merchantmen to a concentrated German onslaught. One of the escorts was the corvette HMCS* Baddeck*, commanded by -Lieutenant Commander Alan Easton, RCNR, which was undertaking her first mid-ocean operation, complete with an un-reliable engine prone to failure, an unserviceable asdic set, and a green crew. Easton recalls that it was a stressful time for everyone on board:*

**Lieutenant-Commander Alan Easton, RCNR**
A prewar merchant marine officer, Alan Easton commanded two Flower Class corvettes, **Baddeck** and **Sackville** on the Atlantic in 1941-1943. **Sackville** was the better vessel and Easton participated in a number of hard-fought convoy battles, notably the defence of Convoy ON 115 during the summer of 1942. He later commanded the frigate **Matane** and the River Class destroyer **Saskatchewan** but his active service ended in August 1944 when, like many other escort commanders, he was hospitalized for ulcers brought on by unrelenting stress. Easton's memoir of his wartime service, **50 North: Canada's Atlantic Battleground** is one of the best of the genre. (Courtesy Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, ****)

I was gaining confidence in the sub-lieutenants, but not yet to a point where I could go to sleep with an easy mind.

The men too were uneasy, but not for the same reason. It was not the officers. They trusted them completely. It was the ship. The lack of harmony had disappeared, poor behaviour was gone. We seemed a happy and vigorous ship now, but … The ordinary seaman in the crows nest, the gunner's mate, the radio operator, could not fail to know our searching gear was not working all the time. They knew as well as the stoker in number two boiler-room that the engines were cranky and might fold up at any time. They knew we were short of speed – more or less always had been – and repairs had been a failure. Men had lost confidence in the ship, and in her ability to do her work.

Few admitted they were often frightened. They sometimes asked one another guarded questions, nonchalantly put but with vivid and desperate thoughts behind them. "If the captain wanted to go fast he could really. He's only favouring the bloody engines because the chief want him to, aint he?" "Ship rolls like hell but she can't turn over. They never turn over. Uh, T…turn over?" "Corvette's too small to be torpedoed." The answers were - almost always reassuring, spoken lustily as a rule but sometime flippantly. Confirmation was all that was asked for and this was given gladly by men in equal doubt. Only at night when two men were keeping watch together did they whisper their fears, admit that the precipitous plunge into the black depths between the billows scared them to death; only at night did they confess that they believed one day the ship would fail to climb the vertical face of the next oncoming wave.[14]

*Seaman Phillip George of* Baddeck *remembered one of the most terrible incidents of a terrible convoy:*

We had a huge gasoline tanker and every morning they would put it on the starboard wing. Every night they would bring it into the middle of the

convoy and put an old clunker, a Greek freighter, on the starboard wing. The submarines finally caught up to us. The first night they hit that starboard wing Greek freighter. The second night they hit another freighter.

We were at action stations almost continually for three days and three nights. The third night I went below, lay down on the floor, took my boots off and put them under my head as a pillow. I don't suppose I'd been there 10 minutes when we were called up to action stations again.

When I came up on deck, I saw the flash of the first torpedo hitting this tanker. A little while later, there was another torpedo, then a huge ball of flame went right up through the clouds. There was nothing to be seen where that tanker was.

Amazingly we picked up the captain and the engineering officer in a life raft. Apparently when the first torpedo hit, the captain had called the chief engineer to the bridge to learn what damage had been done. They were talking when the second torpedo hit and the ship blew. They apparently had been blown off the bridge and must have come together with the raft in mid-air, because they had no idea how they got into it. The captain had a broken hip and we had a good deal of trouble picking them up.[15]

*When it was all over, Alan Easton was exhausted:*

Counting up the sleep I had had since the first ship had been torpedoed fifty-six hours ago, the various snatches amounted to a total of about three and a half hours. Perhaps it was not surprising then, as we straightened away on our last course with the job over, that I could not give the navigator my final instructions before leaving the bridge, without falling asleep. We stood together. He was leaning against the window of the asdic house and I against the bridge rail. I could speak, coherently only about half a sentence and then my words would dwindle off into nonsense. I knew it and struggled against it and by standing erect and moving about a little I thought I eventually conveyed to him what my wishes were. Then I went below and collapsed in my bunk.[16]

**"I am gravely concerned:" The strain begins to take its toll, October 1941**

*Just six months after the creation of the Newfoundland Escort Force, the strain of escorting vulnerable slow convoys in poorly armed and equipped warships manned by green crews who got little rest between operations, was becoming obvious to the senior officers in St. John's. In October, Captain E.B.K. Stevens, RN, responsible for the efficiency of the NEF's ships, felt constrained to warn Ottawa that, having seen the toll taken by recent operations, he was*

gravely concerned about the running of the ships of the Newfoundland Escort Force, particularly the amount of sea-time, relative to rest periods, which is being imposed on the corvettes. ……

Recently corvettes have escorted convoys Eastbound for sixteen days and then after between four and eighteen hours in harbour have returned with Westbound convoys, this voyage lasting between fourteen and sixteen days. This is quite unacceptable.

There seems to be a strong tendency to estimate the endurance of these small ships principally on their fuel carrying capacity. This is not only fallacious, but positively dangerous.

The factor which will ultimately control their ability usefully to keep the sea, is that of the endurance of personnel, particularly that of Commanding Officers.

It is essential to remember … that for the most part Commanding Officers 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 ……

Unless very urgent steps can be taken … I must report that grave danger exists of breakdowns in health, morale and discipline.[17]

**Western Approaches.**

Admiral Sir Percy Noble (Commander in Chief, Western Approaches, 1941 -1942) greets a group of Canadian Officers in Liverpool in 1942. Although the RCN's escort operations were under the nominal control of the USN in late 1941 to early 1943, it was the Royal Navy's Western Approach's command which had the most direct control of day to day operations in the North Atlantic. Behind Noble (wearing a greatcoat) stands Captain F.J. Walker ("Johnny Walker"), CB, DSO and 3 Bars, the most successful U-Boat killer in the Royal Navy. Standing from left to right are Commander Sterkell, RN; Commander Donald Macintyre, RN, another famous ASW officer; Lieutenant Commander Coleman; Lieutenant Commander R.A.S. MacNeil, RCNR; and Lieutenants Mumson and Cooker. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)

**Merry Christmas 1941**

*For many Canadian sailors, Christmas 1941 brought little or no joy. Sub Lieutenant R.L. Hennessy, RCN, of HMCS* Assiniboine *recalled that his destroyer was immediately ordered to sea after having completed a refit at Halifax. On Christmas Eve,* Assiniboine *left the refit yard and was*

towed across to the Dockyard [to be] ammunitioned from barges all day. The Dockyard wanted to do a normal day's work and then go back at it the next day. We said, "The hell with that! Tomorrow is Christmas. We'll do the whole job." Of course we started with no ammunition on board as all, so we had to do the whole job from scratch and, when you're doing that from barges it's a hell of a slow process. We certainly spent half the night doing that. We'll draw a curtain over some of the activities on Christmas Day, 1941.

On Boxing Day we went up to Bedford Basin and degaussed,* then down to the compass buoy and swung ship to correct the magnetic compass, completed storing, and by 1600 we were sailing to join a convoy. About eighty-five per cent of the ship's company had never been to sea in their lives. Most of them couldn't have been more than eighteen years old – just a bunch of -babies.

We had heavy weather and it was very nearly twenty-eight days before we set foot on dry land again.[18]

**A process by which the magnetic field of a ship's hull was altered by running an electrical charge through it. This made the ship less vulnerable to German mines which detonated by magnetism.*