

**“THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC IS GETTING HARDER”:**

**VICTORY IN MID-OCEAN, DECEMBER 1942 - MAY 1943**



**The Most Constant Enemy -- the North Atlantic**

In the North Atlantic, warship decks were hazardous in anything but a calm sea. In this fine photograph by G.A. Milne, taken on the frigate, HMCS **Matane**, in January 1944, a sailor checks the depth charges in his ship's stern racks. The sea is rough but it could be a lot worse. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 134326)

### **“Keep the hell out of it:” Tempers flare in Ottawa**

The tactful language in which Churchill phrased his message did not lessen its impact when it reached Ottawa. Having spent more than three years trying to respond to every British request for assistance, often to its own detriment, the RCN was now being asked to leave the main theatre of operations because the Royal Navy did not regard it as an effective fighting force. Some officers at NSHQ felt that the British were overlooking the fact that the Canadian navy, poorly equipped to do so, had only undertaken mid-ocean escort work in 1941 at the request of the Admiralty and had largely been stuck with escorting the slow convoys – the most vulnerable convoys which usually suffered the highest losses. But these same officers were ignoring the fact that prescient observers such as Murray had, for more than a year, been pointing out the difficulties faced by the escort groups, with little helpful response from either the Admiralty or NSHQ. Ottawa bore a large share of the responsibility for the situation it now found itself in because its insistence on the unbridled expansion of the navy had created deficiencies in training, equipment and, ultimately, performance. The snowball of expansion had now landed on Admiral Percy Nelles’s desk – and he was not at all happy about it. Captain Eric Brand, RN, the British officer posted to Ottawa, -remembered what happened when he entered Nelles’s office with an -offer to help by using personal contacts at the Admiralty and was abruptly told to “keep the hell out of it.”<sup>1</sup>

One of Nelles’s subordinates took a more balanced view. When the Chief of the Naval Staff learned that Horton’s chief of staff, Commodore J.M. Mansfield, was coming to North America to explain the reasons for the change, he sent one of his senior staff officers, Commander Harry De Wolf, RCN, to attend a joint Allied conference on the trans-Atlantic convoys held in Washington in the last days of December 1942. De Wolf pointed out to the American and British officers present that the root of the RCN’s problems was that, for two years, it had made every effort to meet continuous requests from Britain and the United States for more escorts in the North Atlantic, under the premise that “any ship is better than none.”<sup>2</sup> He also told them firmly that a decision to remove the C-Groups from the mid-Atlantic would have to be approved by the Canadian government, whose view was that the RCN had “sort of grown up with this North Atlantic problem and feel we have a permanent interest in it.” De Wolf was actually laying the groundwork for a goal long favoured by the RCN – the removal of the complicated command structure in the western Atlantic which placed it under nominal American control. It was time for Canada to secure control of its own waters.

When De Wolf returned to Ottawa, the question of the removal of the C-Groups was still under discussion but any possible Canadian grounds for opposing the transfer were demolished by the sad tale of Convoy ONS 154.

## **“The sea was dotted with lights:” Convoy ONS 154, December 1942**

On 19 December 1942, Escort Group C-1 sailed from Londonderry to pick up ONS 154 coming out of Britain with 45 merchantmen. Consisting of the destroyer *St. Laurent* (Senior Officer) and the corvettes *Battleford*, *Chilliwack*, *Kenogami*, *Napanee* and *Shediac*, half of which were veterans of the MOEF, C-1 was relatively well equipped for a Canadian group. *St. Laurent* had HF/DF and Type 271 radar, while the five corvettes had been fitted with Type 271 just prior to sailing. The Senior Officer, Lieutenant Commander Guy Windeyer, RCN, a former British officer who had joined the Canadian navy at the outbreak of war, was new to the group, however, and had only served as Senior Officer for one convoy. Although Windeyer had planned a group exercise at Londonderry, it was cancelled because of bad weather and there was no time for further training, particularly on the new radar sets, before C-1 sailed. Another problem was that the group's second destroyer, HMS *Burwell*, was forced by mechanical defects to remain behind in Londonderry.

Unfortunately for ONS 154, it was routed south toward the Azores to give it some respite from the stormy winter weather. This not only meant that it had to transit the “air gap” at its broadest point; it also brought the convoy within reach of two U-boat packs with 20 submarines in total. On Boxing Day 1942,

*Gruppe Spitz* sighted the ONS 154 and Dönitz guided all available submarines to intercept positions. The first attacks came that night – three merchant ships were sunk and a fourth left drifting and abandoned – but Windeyer did achieve an early success. At 0330 on 27 -December, *St. Laurent* sighted the surfaced *U-356*, a Type VII boat commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Günther Ruppelt, and raked it with 20mm Oerlikon fire which drove it down and then delivered a shallow pattern depth charge attack on the surface swirl where the boat had dived. Ten detonations followed, and then an eleventh which was louder, and a large oil slick appeared. *U-356* was no more although its destruction by the RCN was not confirmed until well after the war.

About three hours later *St. Laurent* sighted another surfaced enemy and drove it off with gun fire. After that, there was a near respite for about 30 hours as many of the U-boats lost contact but HF/DF operators in the convoy picked up multiple radio signals and it was clear that the Germans were massing for a major attack. One submarine, *U-225*, did manage to maintain contact and torpedoed the tanker *Scottish Heather* as she was refuelling *Chilliwack* astern of the convoy. Fortunately for the tanker, her cargo did not ignite and, although damaged, she was able to make for a British port. *Chilliwack*, with less than a full load of fuel, returned to her escort tasks and, early on the morning of 28 December, drove a surfaced sub down with gun



**Liberty Ship Mark Twain**

The Liberty ships were one of the Allies' war-winning assets. Designed for quick production using pre-fabricated sections that were transported to construction sites by railway, 2,751 were produced in American shipyards between 1941 and 1945. They more than balanced the heavy wartime losses in merchant tonnage. The cargo capacity of a Liberty ship was 9,140 tons dead weight, equivalent to 300 railway freight cars -- one ship could carry 2,840 jeeps or 440 light tanks or 230 million rounds of small-arms ammunition or 3,440,000 daily rations. (Courtesy. National Archives of the United States. NA



**Behind the Battle -- Plot Room, Naval Service Headquarters, Ottawa**

This photograph, taken on 29 November 1943, shows the Plot Room at NSHQ in Ottawa. On both sides, the Battle of the Atlantic was controlled by headquarters and intelligence from all sources -- agents, radio direction finding, prisoner of war interrogations and decoding -- was funnelled to Operational Intelligence Centres in London, Ottawa and Washington and then transmitted to the relevant naval commands. The Plot Room kept track of all friendly and enemy ship movements so that naval staffs could follow the course of operations. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 134337)

aircrew were rescued by *St. Laurent*. As darkness fell, it was clear to every sailor on every ship in ONS 154, naval or merchant, that the coming night was going to be a terrible one.

At 2005, a mass attack was launched seemingly from all directions – in the space of less than four hours, nine merchant ships were sunk, including that of the convoy commodore. The escorts fought back gamely but were unable to prevent the slaughter – three of the corvettes sighted and attacked U-boats and at one point *St. Laurent* came close enough to ram a surfaced submarine but Windeyer could not risk damaging the only destroyer in C-1 Group and sheered away at the last moment. The darkness was lit up by the fires of burning wrecks and the continuous firing of illuminating shells – the commanding officer of HMCS *Napanee*, Lieutenant Stuart Henderson, RCNR, later remembered the scene:

*All ships appeared to be firing snowflake [illuminating shells], and tracers crisscrossed in all directions, escorts firing starshells. The sea was dotted with lights from boats and rafts, and two burning wrecks which had hauled to starboard helped the illumination.*<sup>3</sup>

The attacks ceased around midnight, bringing a welcome lull.

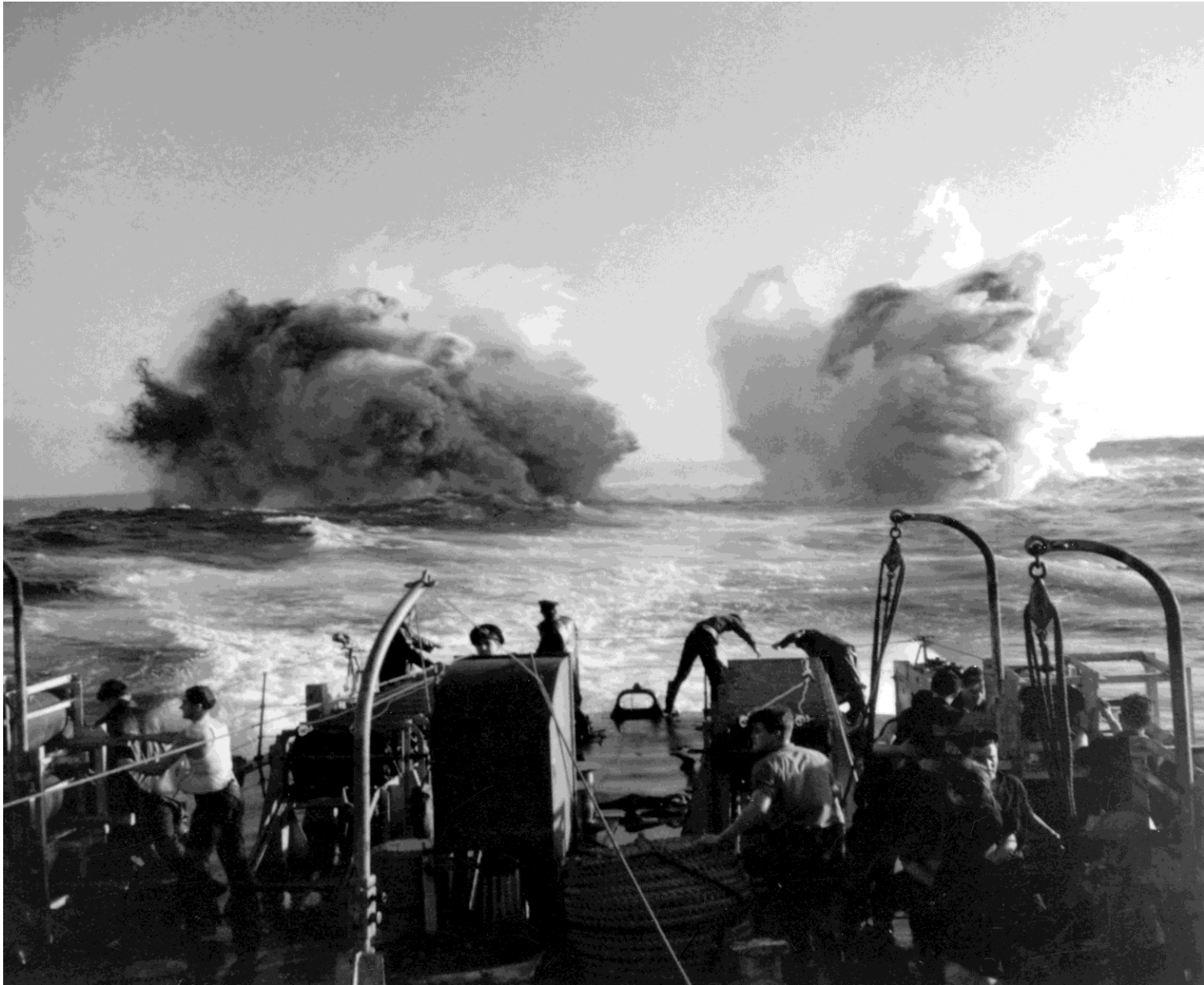
fire before launching a depth charge attack that produced no results.

As the day wore on, 12 submarines manoeuvred into position and in the early evening the onslaught began. At 1920, *Battleford* gained a distant radar contact and while steaming away from the convoy towards it, sighted no less than four submarines on the surface moving in line abreast, about a mile apart, in the direction of ONS 154. The two nearest boats dived but *Battleford* was able to engage the more distant vessels with her 4-inch gun. Unfortunately, the blast from this weapon knocked out her 271 radar and *Battleford* lost contact in the dark. Even worse, when she tried to regain the convoy, her captain could not find it because Windeyer had not informed him of an important course change. *Battleford* searched all night but only rejoined the next morning.

This was unfortunate because ONS 154 was definitely in harm's way and every escort was needed. Admiral Sir Max Horton, following events from his headquarters in Liverpool, realized this and ordered two British destroyers to proceed at high speed to reinforce the escort. Meanwhile, in the late afternoon of 29 December Windeyer made an attempt to balance the odds. HMS *Fidelity*, the special service ship attached to the convoy, possessed two float planes and tried to launch one to drive away the surfaced submarines following in the convoy's wake. The sea was so rough that it crashed although, happily, the

### Depth Charge Attack from the Stern

A depth charge pattern dropped from the stern racks of a Canadian frigate detonates in this photograph by G.A. Lawrence taken in January 1944. Depth charges, either dropped astern or launched sideways, interfered with the operation of the Asdic and often caused loss of contact with a U-boat. The answer to the problem was ahead-throwing weapons such as Hedgehog and Squid but these did not enter Canadian service until 1943. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 133246)



During the daylight hours of 30 December the enemy finished off the damaged survivors which had fallen behind. Sadly, they also sank *Fidelity*, which was astern of the convoy and she went down with the loss of 334 crew members and survivors. That afternoon, HM Ships *Meteor* and *Milne*, the destroyers sent by Horton, arrived and managed to drive off three submarines shadowing the convoy. However, their fuel state was such that, after a quiet night, they had to be detached to the Azores, along with *Shediac* and *Battleford*, to refuel as C-1 had lost its tanker when *Scottish Heather* had been hit. This reduced the escort to only four vessels (*St. Laurent*, *Chilliwack*, *Kenogami* and *Napanee*).

By this time, Windeyer was verging on physical and nervous collapse. He fully expected that the coming night would witness “the final carving” of ONS 154 and advised the captains of the fast steamers, *Adrastus* and *Calgary*, who were carrying many civilian passengers, to use their own judgement about whether or not to stay with the convoy.<sup>4</sup> Both opted to continue with ONS 154 and the night of 30 December was fortunately a quiet one with no attacks. The following day, the destroyer HMS *Fame* -arrived and her captain, who was senior to Windeyer, assumed command. This was a good thing as by now Windeyer, “seeing torpedoes at every turn,” was in such a state that he had to be sedated by *St. Laurent*’s medical officer.<sup>5</sup> The battle for ONS 154 ended that day when the U-boats broke contact.

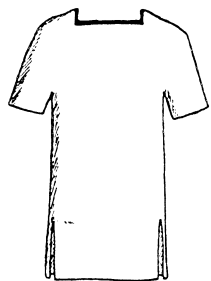
#### **“Another real good turn you have done us:” The RCN leaves the mid-Atlantic**

There was no doubt that ONS 154, which had lost 14 of its 45 ships, was a catastrophe and it was also clear there had been a failure in the leadership of the convoy escort. The debacle destroyed any opposition that NSHQ could put up against the transfer of the C-Groups and it was now simply a question of arranging the details. This was done when Horton’s representative, Mansfield, arrived in Ottawa on 2 January 1943 and, after discussion, it was agreed that the four C-Groups would leave the mid-Atlantic for a period of four months. During that time they would undergo intensive training and have their equipment upgraded before joining the Britain-Gibraltar convoy route, which, compared to the North -Atlantic in winter, would seem almost like a tropical cruise. The Canadian Cabinet War Committee agreed to the transfer on 6 January, subject to three conditions: the four groups would be returned to the MOEF not later than May 1943; the RN was to continue its commitment in terms of ships to the Western Local Escort Force; and the Canadian corvettes detached for Operation TORCH were to be returned as soon as possible.

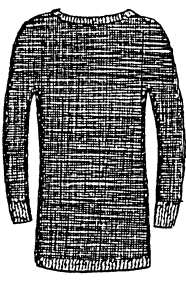
In communicating these conditions to Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, his British opposite number, Nelles stressed the importance of the North -Atlantic for Canada and its navy:

*It has been our policy to build up Canadian escort forces for the specific purpose of protecting North Atlantic trade convoys in addition to our coastal communications. Public interest in the Canadian Navy is centred on the part it has taken in this task, which is without question one of the highest and enduring priority upon which the outcome of the war depends. We are satisfied that the Canadian Navy can serve no higher purpose than to continue to share this task, which we have come to look upon as the natural responsibility for Canada.*<sup>6</sup>

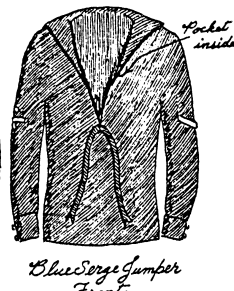
There was a certain amount of relief in Britain when this message was received. Senior officers at the Admiralty were aware that Horton had placed them in a very awkward situation with a nation that had done its utmost, despite very inadequate means, to support Britain since the outbreak of the war. Attempting to smooth ruffled feathers, Winston Churchill sent a personal message of thanks to Mackenzie King which concluded with the phrase: “This is another real good turn you have done us.”<sup>7</sup>



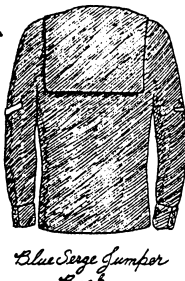
White Cotton "Flannel"



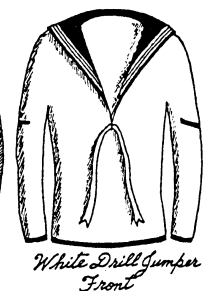
Blue Wool Jersey



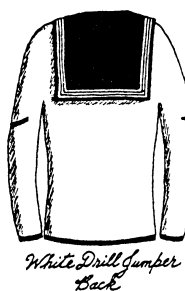
Blue Serge Jumper Front



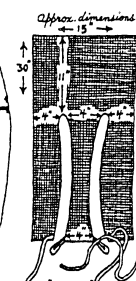
Blue Serge Jumper Back



White Drill Jumper Front



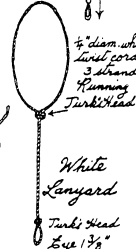
White Drill Jumper Back



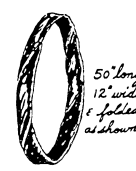
Approx dimensions



Length of the lanyard with the 2 Turk's heads brought together.



White Lanyard



Black Silk Scarf



Blue Jean Collar



Stitched together



Seaman's Knife



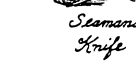
Detail of Jumper "V" showing the loops for the tape



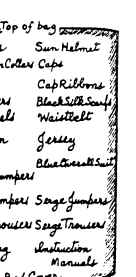
Wooden Ditty Box



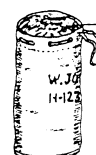
Metal Cap Box



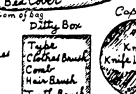
Seaman's belt - blue or white canvas



A Seaman's Kit laid out on his kit bag for Kit Muster



Appearance of a Seaman's Kit Bag



Boots, Boot brushes



Cap Box



Table Cloth brush

Combs

Wash brush

Tooth brush

Soap Bag

Instruction Manual

Bed Cover

Bottom of bag

Ditty Box

Cap Box

Table Cloth brush

Combs

Wash brush

Tooth brush

Soap Bag

Instruction Manual

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More to the point, a previous Canadian request for the transfer of modern destroyers from the RN to the RCN, which had been delayed pending the decision on the removal of the C-Groups, was approved and the RCN could look forward to getting a badly-needed increase in destroyer strength in the coming months. In saying farewell to the C-Groups, the Admiralty did acknowledge their contribution in its *Monthly Anti-Submarine Report* for January 1943 by stating that the Canadians had carried “the brunt of the of the U-boat attack in the North Atlantic for the last six months, that is to say, of about half of the German U-boats operating at sea.”<sup>8</sup> However the *Report* also warned that “the critical phase of the U-boat war in the Atlantic cannot be long postponed.”