1943

CHRONICLE OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY 6

Ice: An even greater peril

In the North Atlantic in winter, one of the greatest dangers was spray from the waves freezing on the upper surfaces of a ship, increasing its weight and affecting its stability. Lieutenant Latham B. Jenson, RCN, describes the perilous situation that ice caused for HMCS Niagara *during a winter voyage from St. John to Halifax in early 1943:*

The trouble with freezing spray is that it compounds itself exponentially. The more iced-up the ship is, the greater the area on which the spray freezes and the greater the top weight. Eventually, the weight increases so much that there is a real possibility of rolling over. An ordinary wire rope, say one inch in circumference, starts with a thin film of ice and rapidly grows. Our guard rails had become an icy bulwark. It was a dangerous situation.

There was nothing to be done but to call all hands and get them on deck with whatever they could find to pound off the ice. Soon the pitch darkness was filled with bundled-up people with hammers, baseball bats, shovels, axes, rolling pins and who knows what else, all pounding and banging, seeming to make little progress. By eight o'clock it was getting light and the ship was still covered with ice. The chief boatswain's mate said to me that the hands were going to quit and have some breakfast. I replied in rather a loud voice, "Fine, you tell them to enjoy it because it will probably be the last meal they will have." Everyone kept right on pounding and within an hour or two the ice was diminished and the ship felt much better. By that evening, we were alongside in Halifax.[1]

"Those guys ain't fooling:" The RCN encounters the glider bomb, August 1943

In late August 1943, Escort Group 5, consisting of HM Ships Nene *and* Tweed *and HMC Ships* Calgary, Edmundston *and* Snowberry, *participated in a series of offensive patrols in the Bay of Biscay intended to make it difficult for U-boats to break out into the open Atlantic. On 25 August, Lieutenant Barry O'Brien, RCNVR, commanding the corvette, HMCS* Snowberry, *remembered that they ran into a new and terrifying German weapon:*

At 1342 they appeared overhead at 4,000 feet, all 21 of them – later identified as fourteen Dornier 17s and seven Ju-88s. They proceeded to split into groups of three and we all fully expected a dive-bombing attack from ahead, but they fooled us and moved over to the starboard side, giving evidence of a low-level job from beam-on. This, too, was not to be.

It was evident that this was not an ordinary high-level attack as each bomb appeared to shoot out from under the planes for a distance of 200 feet or so, leaving behind a trail of white vapour. First the bomb ran on a parallel course to the target ship, then it suddenly made a right-angle turn towards the target and followed any evasive actions of the ship. Each Dornier dropped a bomb, but their homing technique was lousy. They caused damage only by two near misses.

At 1418, *Nene* signalled, “Speed 14 knots” and at 1425, “Flag 1,” which means take individual avoiding action. At 1430, *Tweed* to *Snowberry*, “What is your best speed? Answer, “15 knots.” *Tweed* to *Snowberry*, “Don’t give us that, we are doing 18 and we can’t shake you.” The chief ERA [Engine Room Artificer of *Snowberry*] confessed afterwards to urging 10 more revs out of the old ice cream freezer than he ever had before. He claimed that by the time the news of the enemy planes reached the engine-room, there were at least 50 around, so he figured we needed all available juice. Heard from the 4-inch gun platform, “Guess those guys ain’t fooling today.” And from another, “Come on in you bastards, so we can get a decent crack at you.” And on the bridge, “Boy this is the first time *Snowberry* has been in this kind of action.” Then came a reply, “Yes, and I had to be here at the time.” ……

The Admiralty sent a wireless message that the enemy had used a new weapon which had been nicknamed “Chase Me Charlie” because of its capability of homing in on a ship. You moved and it moved. The Admiralty also suggest two antidotes: Shoot it down with anti-aircraft guns or plug in all your electric razors because they might be on the same wavelength as the radio-controlled glider bombs. This was later tried, without positive result.[2]

Up spirits!

"The King -- God Bless Him!"
In Commonwealth warships, sailors received a rum ration each day. It was often mixed with water in ornamental wooden buckets like this to create grog and then served out to each man.

The RCN followed the custom of the RN in issuing rum to enlisted personnel on a daily basis. Normally it had to be drunk on the spot, under the watchful eye of an officer, and Lieutenant Latham B. Jenson, RCN, describes this cherished and time-honoured naval tradition:

Whenever the navy is mentioned, in the minds of many people there is a word association: rum. Rum was carried in all ships under the White Ensign in small wooden casks in the spirit room. This was situated in the vicinity of the tiller flat. Wardroom liquor also was stowed there, as was the communion wine. The total daily issue of rum was pumped up by the victualling department with the utmost care as every last drop (except “spillage”) had to be accounted for.

At the pipe “up spirits,” cooks of messes would gather with their fannies (containers) at the place of issue. They were given grog, [2.5 ounce] tots of [overproof] rum mixed with two parts of water, according to the number entitled in their mess. All men age 21 or over were entitled to rum. Men could decide to be Grog or Temperance (G or T on their papers). If Temperance, they were entitled to an -extra shilling or 25 cents a day with their pay. The reason for grog, as opposed to neat rum, was that grog would not keep and had to be consumed the same day. There was a custom called “sippers” (quite illegal) which meant that someone having a birthday or other event of importance might have a sip from each of his messmates’ tots. The result often was drunkenness and into the “rattle,” the first lieutenant’s or captain’s report for appropriate punishment. ……

[Sometimes] the odd man cheated and poured the tot into a container tucked inside his jersey. Neaters, two ounces of over-proof neat rum, went straight down to your boots and, I suppose, was a test of manhood. The rum issue was the height of the day for most men and was a major factor in maintaining morale.[3]

The weather again

Life on a corvette was tough enough in rough weather but, in a storm, it was nearly impossible. Seaman Edward O'Connor of the corvette Morden *recalls a bad gale at sea in 1943:*

The weather started out fine that first week or so and we were making good time when …… the first hint of the coming storm appeared on the horizon to the west. It was a few small clouds to begin with but they grew in size and a stiff breeze sprang up, lifting the tops off waves that hit the ship in a fine spray. The sky was now dark and threatening and rain began to fall but failed to calm a rising sea. The crew was called out to secure lifelines and watertight hatches and to run down a depth-charge that had broken loose, threatening everything in its path as it rumbled about. One second we were chasing it and the next we were trying to get out of its way.

Fog on the Sea
Seen from a sister ship, the corvette HMCS **Chambly** emerges from a fog bank while on escort duty in 1941. Fog was a mixed blessing, it concealed the convoys from the U-boats, which were not equipped with radar in the early days of the battle, but it made station keeping very difficult and brought danger of collision. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 115352)

Throughout that night the wind and seas increased, the wind tearing our ensign to shreds and playing a tune on the guy wires. Heavy seas were breaking over the bow, tossed clear back over the bridge, officers and lookouts trying to find a bit of shelter behind the canvas dodger. Crashing sounds from the seamen's mess could be heard clear up on the bridge. In the mess, it was like a war zone. Cutlery, dishes and metal hat boxes flew about like shrapnel to land in a good few inches of water that sloshed about and continued to pour down from an air vent that had its cover torn away by the wind. The anchor cable pounded on the sides of the downpipe to the cable locker, as if some demon inside was trying to get out. Each time we hit bottom in a trough, the men were driven to their knees and a number of lightbulbs popped in their sockets.

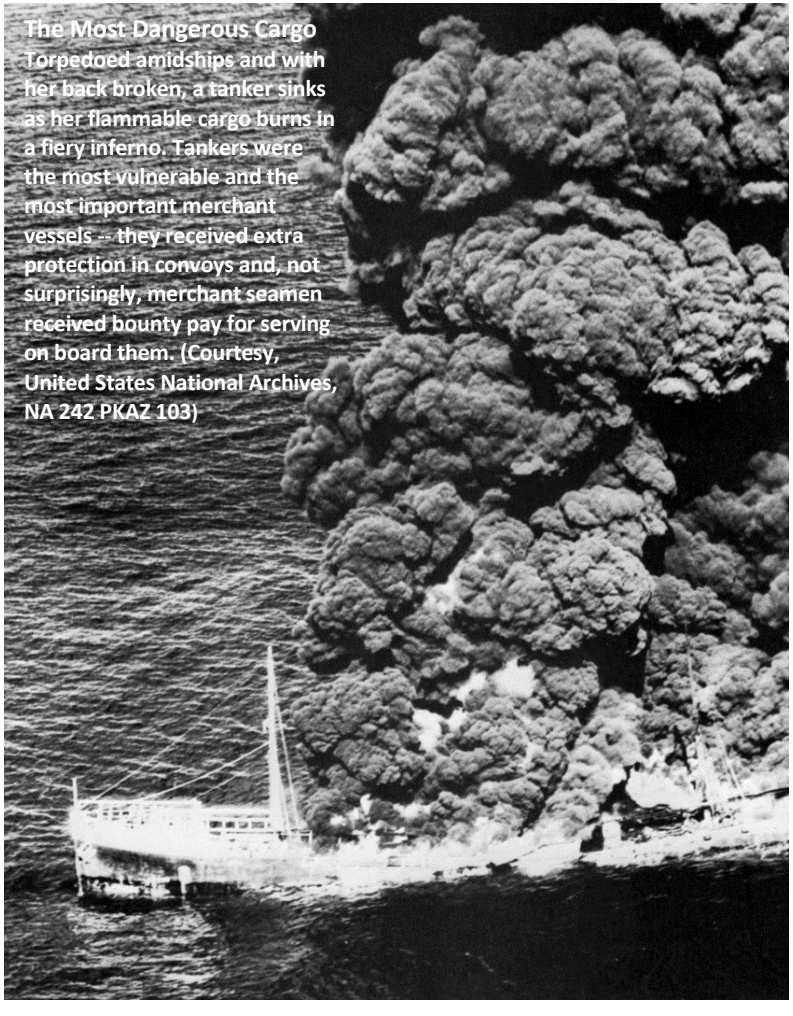
By now the convoy was in a real mess. Ships scattered to the four winds. It was a case of every man for himself. - Escorts could no longer keep station, let alone continue sweeps. *Morden* had all she could do just to keep bow on to the seas. ……

Life went on though, somehow. The cook lost our dinner one day when a great pot of beans became airborne and painted the galley. Trying to scrub out the messdeck flats, the same thing happened to me. After three slides on the wet deck, I became airborne, ending up head first in the pail of suds. A mate clapped and wanted to know what I planned for an encore. ……

The gale or hurricane blew for some five days before … relative calm [arrived].[4]

"A lot of good men died:" U-boat attack on Convoy SC 163, October 1943

Convoy SC 163 with 60 merchant ships bound for Britain in early October 1943 was escorted by C-2 Group which consisted of two British ships and five Canadian corvettes, among them HMCS Morden*. The convoy escort was reinforced shortly before it was attacked 15 U-boats and Leading Seaman Edward O'Connor of* Morden *remembered that the*



The Most Dangerous Cargo
Torpedoed amidships and with her back broken, a tanker sinks as her flammable cargo burns in a fiery inferno. Tankers were the most vulnerable and the most important merchant vessels -- they received extra protection in convoys and, not surprisingly, merchant seamen received bounty pay for serving on board them. (Courtesy, United States National Archives, NA 242 PKAZ 103)

Talk in the mess was mostly speculation on when an attack might come and one of us felt the Germans would back down, even if they knew about our added fire power and it was very likely they did. When you knew an attack was coming, there didn't seem any point to worrying about it when you couldn't do anything. That doesn't mean we weren't scared but feeling that way came so often out there you came to accept it as just a normal thing and went on with the business at hand. Since I had the morning watch I turned in around 2200 and was soon sawing wood in my mick [hammock]. At around 0315 a hand shook my mick, a voice telling me, "Up and at 'em, O'Connor. There's a pot of kye [hot chocolate] on the table." Only half awake, I muttered, "Anything stirring?" and was told everything was quiet. I dropped to the deck and pulled on my sea boots. Regulations had us sleep fully dressed to cut down on time closing up to actions stations. Telling us a corvette would likely sink in fourteen seconds, if hit, also offered come encouragement to be ready. ……

We were just finishing up when, sea, sky and ship turned a blood red, as if a light had been turned on. We ran for the quarterdeck and got there just in time for the big blast. On *Morden*'s port beam a tanker was ablaze bow to stern, a great mushroom of black smoke and flashing gases hung over and smaller explosions sent dark objects high against the flames that I hoped weren't men. Later I realized it was their deck cargo – drums of aircraft fuel exploding. Our alarm bells now broke in and I started running for the bridge down the port side. …… I was halfway up to the bridge when there was a great white flash of light, followed by one hell of a blast that knocked me down but not off the ladder. Back on my feet I reached the port Oerlikon [20mm anti-aircraft gun] and helped strip the cover off. The ammo hatch opened, Smitty took the gun as I reported us closed up and ready to the bridge.

Minutes later, we learned that the second blast had been from the [Polish destroyer] *Orkan*, obviously taking one in her magazine for there wasn't a sign

of her left. We slowed down slightly, passing through the area, but there was nothing, no survivors or even a trace of wreckage. ……

It seemed pretty definite a sub was in the convoy and, if the destroyer flushed him out, the German would probably come out where *Orkan* went down. At least our skipper seemed to be thinking that when *Morden* picked up speed to move ahead. It proved a good move. Minutes later, asdic picked up a contact moving out of the convoy and it was a good one. At least to judge by the bridge speaker. The sharp "ping" had changed to something like "ping-guh."

The [engine] telegraph [on the bridge] rang and *Morden* leaped ahead, swinging to port to get between the sub and the convoy. We then came on the sub from behind for a nail-biting time of expecting the German to let loose a torpedo. For some reason, he didn't. …… Right over him now and a ten-charge pattern went over the side of *Morden*, the fifty foot setting lifting our own stern. A sharp turn then and another ten charges dropped in the same spot. We slowed on the third pass, looking for any sign of wreckage. There was none but one of the seamen yelled and pointed to a spot where oil bubbled up and spread in a great stain. Asdic reported a "lost contact" and, at the same time, the S[enior] O[fficer]'s destroyer came on us from the stern of the convoy, her signal light flashing, "GOOD SHOW, MORDEN, YOU MIGHT GIVE OWEN SOUND A HAND WITH SURVIVORS."

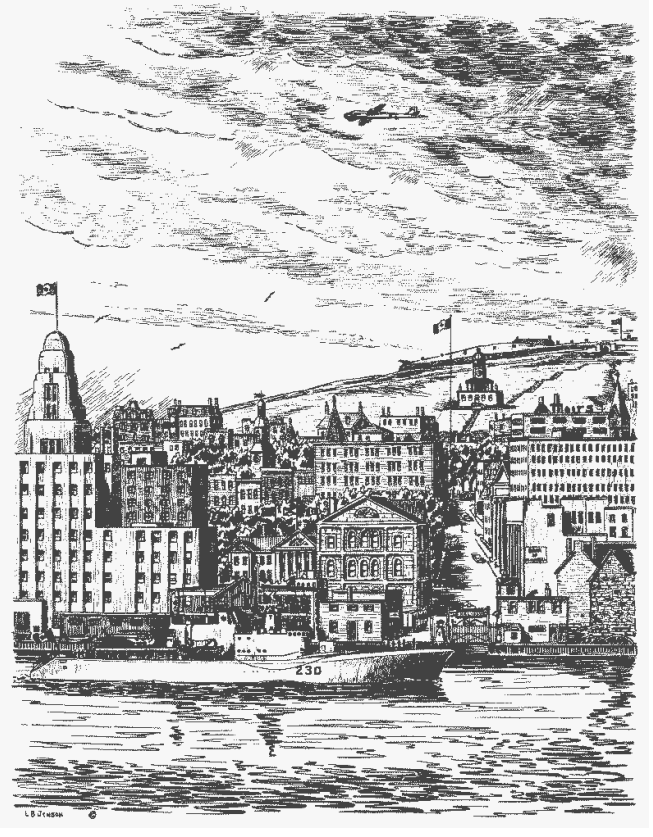
The sun had not yet got over the horizon, we could make out the thin spiral of smoke from the burning tanker and made for it. The smoke disappeared before we got halfway and the burning ship must have gone down at that point. ……

A lot of good men died out there and I still think about them.[5]

Ports of call (2): Halifax – the depised "Slackers"

If Newfie John was high on the list of favourite ports of call, Halifax was at the bottom. Lieutenant James Lamb, RCNVR, explains why:

For men on the lower deck, Halifax was a virtual desert. Swarming ashore from crowded messdecks at the end of a long voyage, they found little to entertain them there, apart from the handful of crowded movies, seedy cafés, and the wet canteen. In later years there were games on the sporting-grounds ashore and film showings for the duty watch on board, organized by base sports and recreation officers, but Halifax, perhaps because of its size and the numbers of men cooped up in barracks and ships, never got around to providing the range of activities laid on for ships' crews in other ports, particularly Newfyjohn. Boredom in barracks and frustration in the messdecks of ships alongside bred a growing anger and tension in Halifax, a feeling intensified by the base's "9 to 5" and "long weekend" mentality, which left the dockyard virtually deserted except for thousands of men cooped up in berthed ships.[6]



As the wartime navy used to sing about Halifax:

You're a little bit of Hades, rose from out the sea one day,
And it settled across from Dartmouth on a dark and dreary day,
And when the government saw it, sure it looked so bleak and bare,
They said, "Suppose we grab it, we can send the Navy there!"

So they sprinkled it with barracks and matelots then dropped in,

And here and there a jukebox added to the awful din,
And then they had a Shore Patrol so the boys could not relax,
And when they had it finished, sure they called it Halifax![7]

Halifax, As Seen from the Harbour
Halifax in 1960 but relatively unchanged from the wartime era. One of the best deep water ports in the world and the RCN's major base, the wartime navy disliked Halifax because of limited leave activities, the perceived unfriendliness of the civilian population, and the rigid mindset of the many shore-based officers. (Drawing by L.B. Jenson, courtesy of the artist)

"Queen of the Sea protect us:" A civilian in the North Atlantic, October 1943

In the autumn of 1943, John Connolly, executive assistant to Angus Macdonald, minister of the Naval Service, travelled across the North Atlantic on the corvette Orillia *to carry out a fact-finding mission. Connolly kept a diary of his voyage which, because he was seasick for most of its duration, was brief in detail but does portray the nature of the war in the North Atlantic with compelling immediacy.*

Beautiful – but eerie. Watch standing around in their hoods. – Always looking, It is monotonous. Zig zagging. No time [have] these men for great policy thinking. They live from watch to watch and carry on regardless [of] weather or subs ……

No school boy enthusiasm here. Just a job to be done. Maybe leave to London. ……

I just don't think about Subs. But carry lifebelt always and wear it on deck. Not much point worrying about Subs. I wouldn't be much at a job like this – even in command. The monotony would get me down. But I am lost in admiration at these young Canadians – giving up so much at home to do this.

[At] Times [it is] rough – others smooth. This ship rides everything. It doesn't cut into the waves so its up and down hill all the time – and pitching. ……

What a war effort! No home comforts. Rolling and pitching – keeping station Thinking out Navigation Guarding the convoy Threatened by torpedoes every minute.

Heavy food – no exercise. Dependent on weather – engines – other ships ……

How brave these young men are …… running a ship with complete confidence Joking laughing. They are the stuff. ……

One can't go through this thing without a deep emotional reaction. The sea at night – the slender ship the clouds the moon …… the foam the roar, the whistling winds – What a power of the elements – and the God that *made* them

Oct 13 …… We are now in the gap …… Saw the last of Newfy planes this a.m. Lots of talk of subs. Two said to be on our path moving south some officers pessimistic about ability to deal [with acoustic torpedoes] and take a dim view because of [the loss of] *St. Croix*.

When you see the waves and the rain and the pitching of the ship you realize that fair equipment is not good enough. They need the best. ……

Unwarned – Action stations bells I was not happy. I shook. Out of bed fast – into Life Belt, coat and hat and up. Drama and Death – I thought I was sent for. Silent hooded figures on the Oerlikons. Gun crew active on the 4" Officers at post Gunnery Officer calling the routine enemy in sight Fire – the half black, half blue sky, the moon ……

Oct 14 Partly cloudy. Rather rough – heavy swell – not sickly but nearly so. Planes in A.M. from Iceland. Support group now with us …

Captn at supper says to-night's the night. The X-O -[executive officer] says before midnight. Well its midnight now, but I don't feel any more secure. It doesn't worry these young lads …..

Stood on bridge tonight for an hour – in rain. There is brilliant moonlight – Heavy clouds – danger is close. God help us. Queen of the Sea protect us. ……[8]

True heroes – the Merchant Marine

True Heroes, The Fortunate Few – merchant sailor survivors arriving in Halifax, April 1943
Merchant seamen saved from sunken merchant ships arrive in Halifax on 21 April 1943 on the rescue trawler, HMS **Northern Gift**. An effort was made to provide a rescue vessel or vessels, equipped for the task of saving and caring for survivors, on each convoy. The presence of such ships was a tremendous boost to the morale of the merchant seamen whose chances of surviving a torpedoing in the North Atlantic were very poor. Nonetheless, after a few days ashore many of these men would be shipping out on new vessels.(Photograph by G.A. Milne, courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 153052)

The Battle of the Atlantic, Rear Admiral Leonard Murray stated, "was won by the courage, fortitude and determination of the British and Allied Merchant Navy." As the senior Canadian naval officer in the theatre, Murray was in a good position to know just how important the contribution of the merchant marine sailors was to the Allied victory but there is also the grim evidence of the statistics. During the Second World War, German U-boats sank 4800 merchant vessels totalling more than 21 million gross tons, killing at least (the figures are not complete) 40,000 merchant marine sailors. About 75% of these losses occurred in the North Atlantic and the Battle of the Atlantic could not have been fought – and certainly could not have been won – without the Allied merchant mariners. Unfortunately, their vital role is all too often overlooked.

Many of the Canadian merchant sailors were young teenagers who were rejected by the RCN because of their age. Earle Wagner of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, recalls that,

The war broke out just a few months after I finished school, I was fifteen. When I was sixteen I went to go into the Royal Canadian Navy as a boy seaman and they wouldn't take me, didn't need me. So a few months later when I turned seventeen I went in the merchant navy. It was usually sixteen [before] you could get in, but people lied about their age and got in at fourteen and fifteen. Things weren't too strict. If you looked able and willing and had reasonably good health, they took you.[9]

Wagner remembered that, contrary to popular belief, the pay was not that good in the Merchant Marine:

I got $45 a month and they put a 35 percent war bonus on top of that. Comparisons of wages between the Royal Canadian Navy and the Canadian merchant navy overall, invariably wound up that they were all making more than we were. That can be proven out. But the myth was that we were overpaid. They thought we were all mercenaries, that we would go wherever the biggest money was. That was one of the things the navy always threw at us. Whenever we got in port sometimes it could end up in a drunken brawl.[10]

Discussions of pay, of course, do take into account the element of risk – merchant vessels, not warships, were the prime targets and that was particularly true of tankers and ammunition carriers. As Clarence Purcell of Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia, comments, the shipping companies had ways of reducing the bonuses paid for dangerous cargo:

We left Manchester and come back and the ship went in dry dock in New York 'cause she was carryin' gasoline before and her plates were all gone. I guess a ship can only carry gasoline so long 'cause it rots the tanks. You change either to a crude [oil], or a light and heavy cycle [of fuel]. You don't carry the same cargo on every trip. …… So I got off there in New York and I got on another Norwegian ship called the *Tercero* as an ordinary seaman. She was carryin' half cargo, half ammunition. See, they'd load them half with half, than they wouldn't have to pay the bonus. You got to carryin' a full load of ammunition before you get paid extra money, danger pay. That's what they done.[11]

Whatever the merchant sailors were paid, it was not enough for the hazards they faced. Jim Boutilier was on the tanker Montrolite *when it was torpedoed off the east coast of the United States in February 1942 and remembered that, when the torpedo struck,*

It was a sort of blinding flash. For a few minutes I didn't know anything. It just knocked me right away from the wheel over in the flag locker at the side of the wheelhouse. I scrambled to my feet. The way I look at it, I must have been out for a few minutes because when I came out on the boat deck, one of the boats had been launched and was gone. So then we saw one of the lifeboats from aft – we had a following wind at sea from the stern – and the boat was launched and was drifting up along side the ship towards the bow, so I jumped and they pulled me into the boat. ……

We were dead in the water and we knew that we were going to get another one, so the best thing was to get out of the way, abandon ship. About fifteen or twenty minutes later, they hit her on the other side with another torpedo, but we were all clear of it by then. It hit, we figure, between the fuel

tanks and cargo tanks. You take, with diesel oil mixing with the Venezuelan crude – it was a good grade of light crude – boy, she just went, everything went. She caught fire and all you could see was the flames and the smoke. The first thing, she was gone.[12]

Percy Lambert was on the modern freighter Loch Katrine*, sailing as part of Convoy ON 115, when she was torpedoed in the evening of 2 August 1942:*

It's an awful bang when a torpedo hits a ship; you go about twenty feet in the air, or I did. It's hard to describe the noise, it's such a racket. Right in the engine room. Everything went black, everything went out. …… I jumped and I knew right where to go for boat stations. ……

I started to put the lifeboats in the water. I said to hell with this, I'm going on the next one. Instead of going down the ladder, I jumped and grabbed the halyards or falls and went down. We hauled some people out of the water and that's how I learned my hands were burnt. I reached down to haul a fellow out and salt water hits my fingers. I burnt my fingers, I imagine, lowering them in the water with the rope and then grabbing the falls and going down. You know, you're nervous, you want to get in there too. Panic is an awful thing. I never knew panic till I seen that. I was never one like that. People just dove in. If you haven't seen panic, you don't know it, how people react. Even in the dark you could see it.[13]

Even if the sailors got safely off a torpedoed ship, there remained long voyages in lifeboats in the Atlantic. George Evans of St. John's, Newfoundland, was on one of two lifeboats that got away from the Norwegian freighter Einvik *when it was torpedoed in the North Atlantic:*

It started to get cold and it was blowin' and snowin'. Three or four days later my feet started to get numb and [we would] rub one another's legs to keep the circulation goin' because you were cramped up in a small boat – eleven of us in one boat and twelve in the other. We started to get mountains of sea then and we put out a sea anchor and that'd keep you from goin' back. The other boat was a motor boat and had towed us, it got rough, it broke clear and they went one way and we went another way. We had a sail and put the sail up. It was about 450 miles south of Iceland. ……

That was my home for eight and a half days, out in a lifeboat. We had to ration. We were only allowed about an ounce or two of water, two or three times a day. We had hard biscuits and meatballs and gravy, that's all we had. Then we got to the Icelandic fishermen and they gave us their lunch – coffee, hot chocolate and their grub. I'll tell you, it was some great to have hot chocolate and food, it really was wonderful.[14]

Seaman Jim Boutilier was in one of three lifeboats that got away from the tanker Montrolite*:*

We were in the lifeboat about three days, rough weather all the time. We managed to keep her afloat; if she'd swamped, there wouldn't have been a chance at all. It was just like a nightmare. We had everything, even sleet. You take where we were sunk, it was pretty well around the edge of the Gulf Stream, but [we were] … driven north in a gale for three days. We had to use our sail for a sea anchor; tie it to a rope and put it over. Tried to keep the lifeboat up into the wind and sea, but there was times we had to take to the oars. But you had to have a rest too, you couldn't do it all the time. We bailed steady all the time, just a couple of buckets, whatever we could, and spell one another off. We tried everything we could [to keep] from filling with water. At one point we had to take the sea anchor in, and take the sail and try to lash it around the boat because we were tired of bailing.

I don't think they put on too much a search to look for anybody. It was an old British merchantman who got astray from a convoy [that rescued them]. [15]

More than 12,000 Canadians served in the merchant marine during the war and 1,600 lost their lives, a higher proportional loss rate than that suffered by the Royal Canadian Navy, the Royal Canadian Air Force or the Canadian army. Their valour must never be forgotten.

The enemy below: A U-boat officer remembers

The Enemy Below (1) -- U-boat Officers
Young, dedicated and professional, two U-boat officers relax on the "Winter Garden" at the rear of the conning tower of **U-612**, used for training in the Baltic. On the left is **Leutnant zur See** Pieper and on the right **Leutnant-Ingenieur** Werner Hirschmann, age 20. Hirschmann made a war patrol in **U-190** to Canadian waters in 1945 and surrendered to the RCN at the end of the war. (Courtesy, Werner Hirschmann)

Werner Hirschmann began his career in the Kriegsmarine *as a 17-year-old officer cadet in the autumn of 1940 and ended it in on 12 May 1945 as a 22-year-old* Oberleutnant (Ingenieur*) on board U-190 when it surrendered to the RCN in 1945. In 1952 he he emigrated to Canada and worked as a computer engineer up to the time of his retirement. Mr. Hirschmann is a member of a number of Canadian naval associations and has frequently spoken to -Canadian audiences on the subject of his wartime service. The following passages, which deal with his decision to join the navy, life on a U-boat and the morale of German submarine crews, were extracted from his unpublished memoirs and appear with his permission.*

My father participated in the battle of Jutland in 1916. Through him I became interested in all matters maritime. As a kid I read every book about naval history I could get hold of and as a kid I never dreamed of a career as a fireman or a pilot – I wanted to be a sailor.

When I finally had to choose a career, other factors entered into my decision to join the Navy. I wanted to save my parents the costs of a university education, I hoped to play soccer against the British in Hong Kong, and I suffered terribly from hay fever! I also had this theory that a sailor's marriage would never suffer from that deadly enemy of romance called boredom. After long absences there would always be the renewal, the starting all over again. Having had my navy career terminated rather prematurely I was never able to test this theory.

I chose the engineering branch, because it accommodated my technical inclinations and also, because I wanted to have a profession other than to find places, to which the ship was expected to go. Guns and torpedoes were of no interest to me.

When your country is at war, as a young man you can't just sit home and let the others fight, and worse, come home in chic uniforms and impress all the girls. And the challenge of adventure was irresistible. …….

After graduation from the Naval Officer's Academy at Flensburg, I wasn't asked where I would like to serve. I was told to report to submarine training. The time was January 1942.

When I was finally involved in front-line missions, the "Happy Times" were over. In my time in the U-Boat service in 1943-1945, we only came to the surface to charge our batteries and to get some fresh air to breathe. In 1944 we were cautioned not to surface during the daylight hours anywhere north of 15 degrees south. Due to the coverage of the Atlantic by small carrier taskforces, there was no place left where we were safe from sudden attacks from the air. Only the snorkel, which enabled us to draw fresh air into the boat while running the diesel engines submerged, enabled us to survive on operations. ……

Some of the readers may have seen the German movie, "Das Boot." Movies have to be entertaining but, in reality, life on a submarine is visually as interesting as watching paint dry. You can't sell a movie that shows submarine life as it actually was. In a movie, when depth charges explode, people inside the boat must be falling all over each other, if not desperately hanging onto something to keep them upright, while the boat rolls through thirty-degree arcs. In reality that submarine isn't moving a fraction of an inch because it is a mass of a thousand tons, surrounded by an almost solid mass of water. In my experience, a depth charge feels like a blow with a giant hammer on an immovable object – valve shafts break, fuses blow, light fixtures

shatter, but the boat doesn't move. One may have the understandable inclination to duck, but one has to wonder why. The chaos, the panic, the screaming in "Das Boot" was interesting to watch but has no connection with reality. But let me be generous, in many aspects the movie was incredibly true to reality and this applies particularly to the everyday life and conditions aboard a submarine. I surely must have met, at one time or other during my service, people very like those officers and enlisted men portrayed in the movie.

Back to reality. The moments of listening to the splash of a depth charge entering the water and the seemingly endless seconds of waiting for it to explode, are truly terrifying. Cold sweat breaks out and I myself always had a terrible urge to go for a bowel movement, but of course I couldn't. With everybody watching you, there is this necessity as an officer to stay cool and put a up a brave face, even make a joke. Then the charge explodes and just as you realize you are still alive, the next charge is already on its way. During all this time the utmost silence must be maintained throughout the boat. All conversation is reduced to a minimum and then only in the form of whispering. Shoes are replaced with specially made socks to avoid any noise when moving through the boat. Coughing or sneezing is considered more criminal than high treason and has to be avoided at any cost. Between depth charges the operator of the hydrophone listening device is attempting to analyze the ship movements above, while the pinging sounds of asdic indicate that the enemy is still in contact. But when another explosion reverberates through the boat and something breaks, there is no time for fear as one is far too busy taking care of the damage to worry any longer. This can go from four to six to ten hours before your boat is finally able to slink away with the hope that the enemy have lost you.

A Dangerous Weapon -- the Acoustic Torpedo
In 1943, the U-boats were equipped with acoustic torpedoes which homed in on the propeller noise of their targets. Countermeasures were quickly introduced but the acoustic torpedo remained a potential threat for the remainder of the war. In September 1944, **U-1227** blew the stern off HMCS **Chebogue**, rendering her a constructive loss. Ten days later the same submarine hit the frigate, HMCS **Magog**, with an acoustic torpedo and the resulting damage shows clearly in this photograph taken by R.G. Arless when **Magog** was in drydock for repairs. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 153486)

Except for the occasional bursts of action, generally life on a submarine was full of boredom. I remember the countless hours of reading books and playing in chess tournaments. We had competitions for inventing the most stupid joke…… Philosophical contemplations about anything and everything were geared to compensate for the somewhat stupefying effects of the endless periods of nothing happening in a closed environment 60 meters below the surface. Atrophy of the brain was one of our biggest problems. Some things, however, that we did not discuss were politics, war aims, or the reason for being out there in the first place.

If you lie down you use less oxygen than when you stand up. If you sleep, you use less oxygen than when you are awake. So, during the last year of the war we were often required to sleep about 20 hours a day to save oxygen and electricity.

There were compensations for the dangers we faced. During the entire mission we were happy to have three normal meals and to have a warm bunk, kept warm by the guy who had just gone on watch. When we came back after a three to four month-long patrol, the boat was usually in need of

extensive overhaul and so the crew had weeks of leave-of-absence, far more than any other branch of the German armed forces. We also got favoured treatment with respect to goods in short supply, whether alcohol, coffee, butter, silk stockings, etc., to take home to our families and we probably ate better than anybody else in the country. After every mission there was the ceremony of receiving medals, which boosted our already sizeable egos. ……

Cold Day in Newfie John -- Three Veteran Corvettes, November 1943
From left to right, the corvettes ***Orillia, Trillium*** *and* ***Calgary*** take a welcome break from the North Atlantic. Commissioned in late 1940, ***Orillia*** and ***Trillium*** were veteran escorts while ***Calgary***, which entered service in early 1942, had participated in Operation TORCH. ***Orillia*** and ***Calgary*** were paid off in 1945 and broken up in 1951 but ***Trillium*** enjoyed a post-war career as a whale-catcher and ended up as a Japanese vessel. Photograph by G.A. Milne, courtesy National Archives of Canada, PA 107932

Let me make a few remarks with respect to the state of our morale during the last years of the war with its unprecedented attrition for our submarine crews. It has been said and said truly that our morale never faltered and I don't think that uneasiness about the future dominated our lives. We learned to put up a good front and I think we approached everything with the same casualness one has when one does one's job in peacetime, whatever it may be.

I believe that the vast majority of us had to fight the fear that threatened to overcome us. But much worse and more immediate was the fear of being considered to be a coward and therefore there was always an internal imperative to do what was necessary or desirable, if not always rational. You simply acted, almost automatically in ways, which, when you thought about it later, seem utterly impossible.

The chances of coming back from a mission were very slim during the last years as many boats never even survived their very first mission. The fact that we could lose our lives was only a rather unfortunate and unavoidable side effect of our own choice of profession and we just kept on doing our job.

Time and time again, however, we had to accept the fact that one after the other of our close friends would never come back. The shock lasted a few seconds and then, over another drink, we switched the conversation to more mundane matters. It was quite astonishing how we lost all sensitivity to the occurrence of death. We considered it quite natural, that before embarking on another mission, we had to pack and lock all our private belongings into a special wooden box and label it with the address of our nearest relative. If we did not come back, the flotilla simply sent the box off. Case closed.

Although the odds against us were well known to us, it never became a subject of discussion. In our minds it would always be the other boat that wouldn't make it. Immediately after leaving port we were, just like any sailor, looking forward to the moment of returning to base. But today I find it almost beyond belief, that after a few weeks at home with our families or in specially dedicated recreation centres, we became very edgy, got ants in our pants and couldn't wait for the moment of departure for the next mission. Such is the foolishness of youth.

Rarely did we become aware of the human suffering we caused. In fact, during the entire war I did not see one single dead person, or any blood. As far as we were concerned, we either came home, happy and healthy, or we didn't come back at all. With a few exceptions, there wasn't anything in between.

Upgraded: HMCS *Sorel* in July 1943
Commissioned in August 1941*, Sorel* served in thr Western Local Escort Service and the MOEF and was one of the first Canadian short foc'sle corvettes to be taken in hand for much needed modifications, which were completed in early 1943. She later served primarily as a training ship, which is why she appears so trim in this picture taken in Pictou in the summer of 1943. *Sorel* is painted in the Western Approaches camouflage scheme of very light grey overlaid with patches of light green and blue in a "wave" sequence. (Canadian Naval Memorial Trust)