

" THE THREE MUSKETEERS"

Commander J.H.S.Macdonald, Commander C.W.Copelin, OBE, Commander Roland F. Harris, DSC. All RCNR.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 all three were employed by Mersey Paper Company or its subsidiary Mersey Shipping Company. Two of them had served in the Navy during the First World War (Copelin in the RN, Macdonald in the RCN).

All three enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy soon after the outbreak of the Second World War, and took training at HMCS Stadacona, Halifax, N.S.

Towards the end of 1940 these three officers, with the rank of Lieutenant, were appointed to command the first three Flower Class corvettes built in Canadian shipyards for the Royal Navy. As originally planned the RCN was to furnish officers and crews to take these ships to Britain, where they would be taken over by RN personnel and armed for convoy duty in the Western Approaches to Britain. The Canadian crews would be returned home for service in their own Navy.

The "Windflower" and "Hepatica" were built by the Davies Company at Lauzon, Quebec. "Trillium" was built by Vickers at Montreal. These corvettes were to receive their armament in Britain, hence they were sent there in ordinary merchant convoys. As a token armament each had 1 old (Lewis) machine gun with about 100 rounds of .303 ammunition; and 4 or 5 old (Mark 4) depth charges.

The corvettes were brought down the St. Lawrence before the winter freeze-up. Macdonald sailed first with "Windflower", in the last week of November 1940, in a convoy from Halifax. Harris sailed with "Trillium" a few days later. Copelin sailed with "Hepatica" about December 20, 1940.

All these convoys encountered long and violent gales the whole way

across, and all were scattered in the passage. Each of the three ~~corvettes~~ unarmed corvettes found itself alone, often obliged to run before the gales, so that the passage took nearly three weeks. Each rigged a dummy cannon on the gun platform forward, consisting of an ammunition derrick and an Asdic box, neatly painted grey, and the "breech" muffled in canvas for "weather protection". Thus any submarine spotting them would not attempt a surface attack.

When ~~Windflower~~ "Hepatica" finally arrived at her destination, at the anchorage called The Tail of The Bank in the River Clyde, she found "Windflower" and ~~Trillium~~ "Trillium" moored together there, and joined them.

The RN now asked permission from the RCN to retain the Canadian officers and crews in these corvettes, as a temporary measure in the then desperate situation in the Western Approaches. This was agreed, and thenceforth for many months Macdonald, Copelin and @ Harris and their men were engaged in the hard and dangerous convoy duties between Iceland and Britain.

~~Out of the three~~ The three ships usually operated together, and the three commanders became known, ashore and afloat, as "The Three Musketeers".

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("The fat one" -- Harris: "the thin one" -- Copelin: "the one with the sea-dog beard" -- Macdonald.) They had many adventures, and some of their merry messages back and forth, often in bad situations, became classics in the folklore of the Western Approaches.

Out of 16 convoys escorted by the Three Musketeers in the Western Approaches, only one ship was lost, although they ~~had~~ had brushes with submarines and aircraft. On one occasion ~~Trillium~~ "Trillium" was machine-gunned by a diving Focke-Wulfe and had 3 men killed and 7 or 8 wounded.

As the U-boats shifted the weight of their attack farther and farther ~~next~~

west, the convoy protection had to be extended in that direction also. In the summer of 1941 the Three Musketeers were stationed at St. John's Newfoundland; and in October 1941 they were returned to Halifax for a much-needed refit and home leave.

Thenceforth they were promoted and separated on various convoy duties, ranging all the way from Trinidad to Liverpool, England. Eventually each had the rank of Commander, and was in charge of an escort group.

After the war, Macdonald and ~~Skipper~~ Copelin returned to their pre-war duties with Mersey Paper Company; Macdonald as Vice-President in charge of Sales in the United States; Copelin as Marine Superintendent. Harris went into business in Halifax.

In 1964 Copelin was the only one of the three still living.