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# Corvette

By

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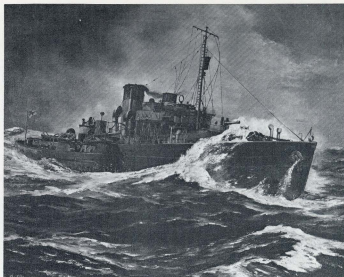
Naval Historian

*During the Second World War, the Navy commissioned artists to record impressions of Canada's war at sea. The author's selection of works here presented shows how very well those artists caught a variety of moods in both the corvettes and the men who sailed in them.*

*With the exception of the Baillie picture, these photographs are of paintings and sketches in the War Records Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.*

WHEN THE *Windflower* steamed into that "Eastern Canadian Port" on the last day of October 1940, Haligonians could be excused for thinking she was a displaced whaling ship from the Antarctic. Built by the "Big Davie" yard in Lauzon and the first corvette to join the Fleet, her ancestry was strictly whale-catcher. In the economic and tactical conditions of that day, it seemed reasonable to believe that a ship that could catch a whale could also catch a submarine.

After Munich, there were a few men in Britain who went to work with a will to try and make up for the neglect of one of her vital defences—convoy escort anti-submarine vessels. Such ships had to be small with good manoeuvrability and acceleration. They had to be able to cope with any kind of weather the North Atlantic should choose to throw at them. They had to have the kind of transatlantic endurance demanded by a zig-



BAILLIE

CANADIAN CORVETTE

*"And how the quartermaster just loved a quartering sea!"*

zagging 80-ship convoy, perhaps under submarine attack for five days, perhaps hove-to for another three in a mid-ocean gale.

The other war was 20 years past and most people had forgotten how close to disaster the Kaiser's U-boats had brought them. But there were others who knew that should war come, convoys would have to be organized from the outset, and for effective convoy there must be large numbers of trawler-type ships to team up with the faster costlier and weather-vulnerable destroyers.

It was early in 1939 that the man who had developed the new whalercatcher design was called to the Admiralty. This was William Reed, head of the firm of Smith's Dock Co. Ltd., of Middlebrough up in Yorkshire. With war clouds ominously gathering from over the North Sea, Reed and the Admiralty constructors worked feverishly to get this new kind of fighting ship



BROOKS

ATLANTIC CONVOY

*"When we're rolling outward bound from Newfoundland."*



McNALLY

KYE

*"... and that hot cup of kye sure went good about the end of the First Watch."*



WOOD

QUARTERDECK, DRUMHELLER AT SEA

*"It's no wonder your socks seemed forever wet!"*



WEYMAN

MESS DECK 1943

*"Did you ever try to get your head down with a lively game going full bore right under your mick?"*

from the drawing boards out into the Atlantic. Before the war was a year old, the first British naval whale-catcher, now called a corvette, was shepherding merchant ships in the Narrows Seas; and here was the Canadian-built *Windflower* steaming in past McNab's and George Islands to secure in HMC Dockyard not six months behind her British opposite number.

Yes, there she was, all 205 feet of her, single funnel, rather straight-stemmed, not exactly a beautiful creature with her distinctively turned-up stern and almost flareless bow. But, for all that, a stout little ship that seemed to have a grip on the water and the promise of being a tight ship if her company should find themselves in a tight spot.



MacKAY

THE LAST DOG WATCH

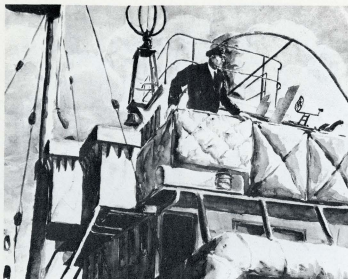
*"Red One Five, an object . . . submarine!"*



WOOD

THE BOARDING OF U-744

*"It was always our ambition to bring one home in prize."*



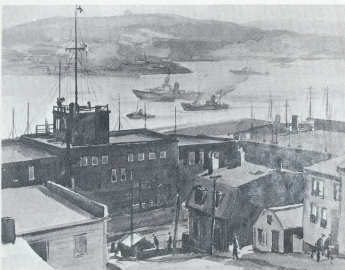
MACKAY

LET GO AFT!

*"Another 20 days 'll see us in 'Derry!"*

and women in the factories, and the sense of dedication of the officers and men who took those corvettes to sea. But from a strictly technical viewpoint that program of building and fitting out 122 corvettes, together with the mighty stream of minesweepers, frigates, Fairmiles and auxiliary vessels that followed, was indeed one of the wonders of the Second World War.

Aside from the wooden drifters and steel trawlers of 1917-18, no warships of any consequence had been built in Canada since the sloops *Halifax* and *Plumper* in the Halifax of Nelson's day and those that saw service on the Great Lakes in the first part of the 19th century.



BROOKS

SIGNAL STATION, HALIFAX

*"Those so-and-so signalmen used to line up the best dates with the wrens in the signal tower before we could get ashore."*



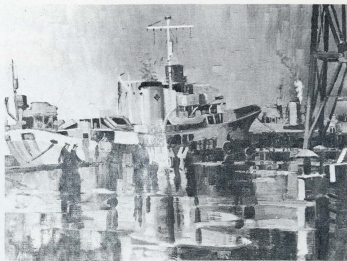
BEAMENT

MOONLIT CONVOY

*"Just like keeping the wolves from the sheep."*

It was recognized when they were built, that the corvette would never become a type-ship of the future post-war fleet. She was being built for little more than half a million dollars to do a specific job—to get to Europe the fuel, food and munitions without which no aircraft could fly, no soldier could fight and no ship could steam, and, without which Britain could not survive. Reduced to simplest terms, it was as simple as that.

The corvettes were in fact a stop-gap—"hostilities only" if you will, very much like the "wavy-navy" RCNVRs who largely manned them. But there is no doubt that, until the frigates came along late in the war,



LAW

PAYING OFF AT SYDNEY, 1945.

*"Many a time you had gaily turned your back on her for a good run ashore, but this was it and, after all the blows she'd brought you through, it was kind of hard to leave her."*

the corvettes, British and Canadian, were the backbone of the mighty effort that eventually achieved victory in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Nor should it be forgotten that the corvettes of the RCN did a splendid job when the United States Navy was so hard-pressed in the Caribbean right after Pearl Harbour, and away up on top of the world off the Aleutian chain.

And 16 of them did their bit in the Mediterranean when Rommel was invited to leave Africa. In fact, Admiral Cunningham had great admiration for what he called the "hat trick", when the *Ville de Quebec*, *Port Arthur* and *Regina* in as many weeks single-handedly disposed of three submarines in the clear waters of that fabled sea. All told, 17 Canadian corvettes had a hand in sinking 15 enemy submarines and in damaging scores of others.

But with the successes and the victories there were the inevitable losses of war: the irretrievable losses of good ships and good men. Because the corvette was small, because the enemy weapon was usually the torpedo meant for larger ships, and because the waters of the vast wastes of the North Atlantic are notoriously cold, the cost in seamen was tragically high.

Our lead ship, HMCS *Windflower*, was lost by collision, the *Weyburn* by mine off Gibraltar. The others went down by torpedo explosion, some very quickly,



BROOKS

CORVETTE GALLEY

"Sometimes hot, sometimes cold, and sometimes none at all!"

some giving their men a few minutes to go over the side: the *Levis*, *Spikenard* and *Charlottetown*; the *Louisburg*, *Regina* and *Alberni*; the *Shawinigan* and *Trentonian*.

There was a great challenge back in 1939 and Canada's corvettes, and the officers and men who sailed in them, met that challenge squarely, just as had the men and women who designed and built them.

