

Naval Research Estab.

H.M.C.S. "Stadacona"

Halifax, N.S.

Jan. 3rd 1943.

Dear Mr. Raddall:-

Have just finished reading your latest book - may I congratulate you on a superb piece of work, and a really fine effort at "painless history".

As we are both members of the Naval Museum Committee - unfortunately I've spent most of my time in Ottawa sorting out naval pay since February - may I be permitted to correct one or two facts in the book.

Page 317 - para 2. The Western Inlet trawlers at Halifax were never fitted with magnetic minesweeping gear. Early in 1941 we took over four of the Norwegian whale-catchers - Star XV, and Sudroyo IV, V & VI and fitted them out at Halifax with Canadian designed gear, of which Mr. Ballard of the National Research Council was the designer.

I was at that time rejoicing in the title of

Magnetic Minesweeping and Degaussing Officer at Halifax, and was in charge of their conversion. The late Mr. Mathers and I had a standing joke between us, as we solemnly affixed our signatures to a document transferring them to the R.C.N. - neither of us being quite sure we were authorised to do so! He was Norwegian Counsel at the time.

These four, with two other wooden M.M.S's (Magnetic Minesweepers) built later at the Isle of Orleans, comprised our magnetic sweepers at the time the field was laid. Fortunately a British flotilla of wooden MMS, built at Brestegan, happened to be passing through our hands for fitting out and degaussing at the time, so we commandeered them, and put them to work too. The mines, although magnetic, were moored, so the ordinary Oropesa sweeper could also be used against them.

I acted as principal adviser to Commander R. Luc D. Barkhouse, the Port Minesweeping Officer on the sweeping operations, and George Ruddle was one of my officers, the mine disposal officer coming under the then Experimental Section of the Torpedo School - I was officer-in-charge at the time.

Barkhouse was a native Nova Scotian from your part of the world, I believe, and his part in the show was, in my humble opinion, never adequately recognized. He suffered severe arthritis as a result of his efforts and now lives at Keetville.

Para 3. - The mines were first found on May 29th about 2 p.m., when the escorts of a Boston bound convoy that closed Halifax to pick up ships sighted two on the surface. By some lucky chance, the 11 Halifax ships passed through the minefield without damage and the convoy went on. George Rundle went out post haste in an M.T. and identified them as German about two hours later. The port was immediately closed, and at day break Barkhouse took his sweepers out and had a channel through by nightfall.

George Rundle went out, and relocated the original mines and tried to tow one in, but it was still anchored. On his way back, he met the sweepers off Sable Island light and Comox had a mine fouled in her sweep that came free and floated as she hauled them in. George, who was in "Standard Coaster" our experimental ship, got a line to

it and headed up harbour. Unfortunately, fog came down and they had to tow it all night.

During the night, the tow parted, so George and his right hand man, Simpson, put off in a dory, and eventually found it by running into it! The next morning, as soon as the fog lifted, it was beached on Ketchikan Island just to seaward of Manger's Beach - much to the consternation of the Army, as it was only about 100 yards from one of their search light emplacements!

He subsequently recovered two more, landing them at the entrance to Ketchikan Harbour. One had 20 minutes to go before it became active, so he fully earned the George Medal that he was awarded as the result of his efforts.

The minor errors in para 3 are - "two German submarines" - it was only one, as they carried 56 mines. The convoy - as above - did not lose its leading ship. It was a straggler from a Boston convoy, and did I curse that ship!

The anchored mine that George first identified was earmarked for recovery

as we had a suspicion there might be a delay mechanism on the anchor. I had got two of the British M.M.S.s, awaiting their turn at fitting out, and on June 2nd put to sea with them to pull the mine up by the roots.

When I got there at 4 pm, the sea was littered with wreckage, and I found that this darn straggler had bumped it in a small fog patch. She had been given precise instructions to keep 3 miles clear of Sanebro L.V. and come up the swept channel. Instead, she was only 4½ miles off when she hit the mine. I'm afraid her skipper got a very cold reception when we interviewed him next morning! Fortunately a fishing schooner picked up her crew and no lives were lost.

It was a mystery to me why some of these fishing schooners weren't lost - they cheerfully disregarded all the instructions about entering port, and only the fact that being principally wood with a very small magnetic field, was probably all that saved them.

Incidentally, it was not till a month later that we declared the whole area safe - not the two days that might possibly be inferred

from the text. The only other minor item I can spot is that "Clayquot" was a Bangor minesweeper, not a corvette. I have a very poor photo of her just before she took the final plunge.

I hope I shall be able to make your acquaintance one of these days, and let you go over the official report of the Halifax mine field which Barkhouse and I wrote. It's no longer on the secret category. I also have a number of photos of exploding mines during sweep operations that might interest you.

Inadvertently, George Randle got a bar to his G.M. for recovering two mines from the field off St. John's Nfld, later in the year. He at present has the prosaic occupation of selling tractors for Stearns, Son and Savours.

Once, again, my most sincere congratulations on one of the best books I have ever read.

Yours sincerely,
A. F. Peers.
Captain R.C.N.

January 4th, 1949

Dear Captain Peers,

It was very good of you to write, and your letter is most opportune, for my publishers tell me that the first edition of "Halifax" is almost gone, and preparations for a second edition must be made at once. Thus I have a chance to correct any errors which appeared in the original edition.

I made a trip in "Comox" on a routine sweep in the early autumn of '43, in company with a party of journalists, and got most of my information at that time. Security was still the god of Headquarters at that time, so that I had to get the facts in devious ways from the "Comox" people and others. I had no reason to doubt their accuracy. What you tell me is one more proof that information received in wartime (even from the horse's mouth) is apt to fall short of the truth in spots. My description of the German mining activity in "Halifax" was necessarily brief, and I can correct the errors without greatly upsetting the printers.

My day aboard "Comox" was an interesting but at the same time exasperating experience. Lawrence, the chief P.R.O. at Halifax, was keen to have a good story done on the job of the minesweepers, who had received no publicity, or very little, in their work. Maclean's Magazine were eager to run such a story, with good photographs, and they wanted it done by someone who was not a routine journalist, for the sake of a fresh outlook. So they wired me and asked me to do it. It was out of my line, but it was a long time since I had set foot on a deck and I thought it would be refreshing. Well, it was refreshing enough. The skipper of "Comox" was a character right out of "Captain Kettle", and I still remember the nonchalance with which he fouled the stems of two destroyers as he swung in to his jetty at the end of the day. Unfortunately all my notions of a story on minesweeping were ruined when we were all ushered into Barkhouse's office and I saw an Intelligence officer (Mitchell, I think) poised beside him like a hunting hawk. Poor Barkhouse was willing to tell us what we had to know to write a decent account of the May affair, but the I.O. pounced again and again, and after half an hour it was apparent to all of us that it was a case of "no story". I asked, innocently, if one might describe the orthodox method of sweeping for a moored mine. The I.O. said No. So I pointed out that the orthodox method had been described and published to the world in Donville-Wife's books for the past 25 years, and that the method was essentially unchanged, as everybody knew, including the Germans. Still the answer was No. We were even forbidden to mention the "Comox" by name, although her name, work and station had been published all over Canada in a press article a few months before. The result was that we trooped out angrily and I wired Maclean's that they could expect nothing on minesweeping at Halifax from me or anyone else. The comments of the newspaper men were sulphurous -- some had come all the way from Toronto and Montreal on the assurance that the Navy was about to "break" a real story on the mining of Halifax, only to find that they were held to the brief and valueless account released by Ottawa. Yet the story had been known to every fisherman on the coast for three months, and to a multitude of merchant seamen already scattered over the world. As Fletcher Coates of the C.B.C. said to me, "Well, at least we've seen Naval Censorship at close hand. It's got to be seen to be believed."

This excessive regard for Security was not Mitchell's fault

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I feel sure, but the fault of Ottawa, which could not see the folly of withholding information which was already common gossip on the coast. This attitude caused a marked skepticism amongst newsmen, and their opinion of the news value of an official Naval news-release was very low by '45. Some editors were pitching the official releases into their wastepaper baskets long before that, along with the more banal photographs, which poured in a steady stream as the war went on. To my mind this was the chief reason why the story of the Navy's achievement failed to reach the public, and why, to this day, it remains almost unknown to the man in the street.

I met Kundle aboard Toronto in Shelburne harbour in the spring of '45, and later saw him board the sub. which surrendered (or rather was taken over) off that port. He impressed me as a keen but somewhat erratic chap, and he was certainly the most voluble Halifax-hater I ever met. He told me that he intended to seek a job in Halifax after the war (which struck me as rather a paradox) and apparently he has done just that. His Man Friday (Simpson ?) on the other hand was one of the mildest and most silent chaps to be found in the service.

I shall visit the Maritime Museum at the first opportunity, and I hope to present to it the Confederate Navy cutlass which was given to Jock Fleming as a souvenir when he piloted Tallahassee out of Halifax during the American Civil War. It is possible, too, that I may be able to obtain the loan of a sea-pass signed by Nelson when he was on the North American station in Albemarle during the American Revolution.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely,

Capt. A. F. Peers, R.C.N.

Hfz