



HALIFAX MILITARY HERITAGE
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Historical Paper No. 4: Halifax, the Royal Canadian Navy
and the First World War

December 21, 2016

Abstract: HMHPS Historical Paper No. 4: Halifax, the Royal Canadian Navy and the First World War

The Royal Canadian Navy had only been founded four years earlier in 1910 when the First World War threw it into a battle for which it was woefully unprepared. First ignored, and then dominated by the Royal Navy, Canadian politicians and naval leaders struggled to meet the demands placed on their navy by the British, but were underequipped, undermanned and undertrained to do so. This resulted in the ships of other government departments, as well as private steam yachts, being pressed into service as warships—a less-than-satisfactory solution. Due to these constraints, the navy was essentially limited to coastal escorts and patrols throughout the war.

The undersigned would be pleased to receive any comments or questions regarding this paper at contactus@hnhps.ca.

John Boileau

Chair, Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society

contactus@hnhps.ca

December 21, 2016

HMHPS Historical Paper No. 4: Halifax, the Royal Canadian Navy and the First World War

The First Casualties

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 put Halifax back into the role she had played so many times before. Because of Canada's status at the time—as so clearly enunciated earlier by Sir Wilfrid Laurier earlier when he was Prime Minister—when Britain was at war, Canada was automatically at war. Canadians responded patriotically to the call to arms. Although the First Canadian Contingent sailed from Quebec in October 1914, all other troops departed from Halifax—nearly 285,000 before the war ended in 1918.

Warships and merchant vessels were constantly leaving and departing the harbour, while formidable defences on its shores and islands bristled with coastal artillery, machine guns and searchlights. Two steel-mesh submarine nets stretched across its entrance. Allied and neutral ships entered through a narrow gap opened and closed in it by gate vessels, while minesweepers patrolled the outer approaches to make sure that enemy submarines had not laid any mines. Halifax quickly became one of the busiest ports in the world, handling fifteen million tons annually—more than seven hundred per cent over pre-war tonnages.

Surprisingly, Canada's first casualties of the First World War were not soldiers but four young midshipmen. On August 14, 1914, just ten days after the start of the war, the RN armoured cruiser HMS *Good Hope* arrived in Halifax to take on coal and left the next day. She was part of a squadron of two old heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, and a converted merchant ship auxiliary cruiser that would soon be dispatched to the Pacific in search of the German Asiatic Squadron under Admiral Graf von Spee, whose two heavy and three light cruisers were a threat to shipping in the Pacific.

In Halifax, Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock, commanding the force, had shifted his flag to *Good Hope*. He specifically requested that four recent graduates from the Royal Naval College of Canada (RNCC), Midshipmen Arthur Silver of Halifax, the chief cadet captain, and William Palmer, also from Halifax and the senior midshipman, join the ship's gun room to help make up crew shortfalls. Two other midshipmen, Malcolm Cann from Yarmouth and Victor Hathaway from Fredericton, were selected by lot. They left Halifax in HMS *Suffolk* and transferred to *Good Hope* at sea off New York. All four had entered the college in 1911.

Classmate John Grant remembered Hathaway as “very fine looking, modest, very nice, played the piano for our singsongs, a promising young officer,” while Palmer was “very brainy, used to be top of the class apparently without having to work.” Grant described Silver as “rather like Hathaway, very well-known Halifax family, keen fisherman and famous for his art in casting” and thought Cann was “a good mess mate.”

On November 1, the South American Squadron was patrolling off Coronel, Chile, when it encountered the German flotilla. Outmatched, outgunned and outranged Cradock and his sailors bravely faced the enemy. In the hour-long gunnery duel that followed, HMS

Monmouth was sunk and *Good Hope* was reduced to a flaming hulk. She blew up and sank with most of her crew, including the four Canadian “middies,” the first Canadians to die in the First World War. It was a major blow to the future senior leadership of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN).

The First World War

Prime Minister Robert Borden, a lawyer from the Annapolis Valley town of Grand Pré, cabled London in the fall of 1914 asking what course of action Canada should take if his government decided to offer naval aid. The reply in October was less than encouraging: “Admiralty inform don’t think anything effectual can now be done as ships take too long to build and advise Canadian assistance be concentrated on army.”

Due to government inaction and procrastination since its formation four years earlier, the RCN was totally unprepared to fight a war at sea when the First World War broke out. Canada’s only major warship on the east coast, HMCS *Niobe*, kept breaking down during coastal patrols and subsequently spent most of her days alongside at Halifax, undergoing maintenance and repairs. In any case, there were only three hundred and fifty trained sailors to man her or any other warships. When the war started, Canada turned operational control of *Niobe* over to the Royal Navy (RN). Reacting to the demands of war, she was ready to go to sea in three weeks. Extra sailors had been rushed from the west coast to man her, the crews of two old sloops no longer fit to fight. Additional manpower came from across the country in the form of volunteers with various kinds of experience, as well as 107 trained seamen from the Royal Naval Reserve in St. John’s, Newfoundland, which brought *Niobe* to her full complement of seven hundred for the first time since becoming a Canadian warship.

With RN Captain Robert Corbett in command, *Niobe*’s first wartime task was to escort a troopship carrying the Royal Canadian Regiment—the country’s only regular infantry unit—from its garrison at Halifax to Bermuda in September. Because of various defects, *Niobe* was denied the opportunity of escorting the First Canadian Contingent when it sailed from Quebec City at the end of October, a great thirty-ship armada of troopships carrying thirty thousand soldiers protected by RN warships. Instead, she searched off the Strait of Belle Isle, looking for a suspected German surface raider that had been erroneously reported in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Borden made his case to Britain again in November, pressing for destroyers and submarines to be built in Canada and for the RN to lend the RCN ships until they were completed. Winston Churchill, Britain’s First Sea Lord, repeated the earlier message: the RN had no ships to spare and building ships in Canada was impractical; instead soldiers were needed from the Dominion. The results of Borden shelving the shipbuilding plans of his predecessor, Laurier, had come home to roost.

As the RCN cast about for suitable ships, a few patriotic—and rich—Canadians helped out. Flamboyant Montreal millionaire yachtsman Jack Ross, medically rejected by the

army, turned to the navy with an offer it could not refuse. He had already donated his small yacht *Albacore*—suitable only for harbour work—and now offered another one, providing he got to command it. Ross went to New York and purchased Willie K. Vanderbilt's twenty-four-knot yacht *Tarantula*, reputedly one of the first high-speed steam-turbine ships. Rechristened HMCS *Tuna* at Halifax, at Ross's expense she was fitted out with a 3-pounder gun and two torpedo tubes and entered service in December 1914.

In the fall of 1914, *Niobe* joined the RN's Bermuda-based 4th Cruiser Squadron blockading thirty-two German merchant ships sheltering in neutral New York harbour. The work was tedious and boring: stopping, boarding and searching every vessel for contraband intended for Germany or for German nationals trying to get back home to help the war effort. After sixteen days on station, it was back to Halifax for the dirty, dusty task of coaling ship, taking on fresh provisions and then returning to duty.

Already decrepit, *Niobe* was soon worn out by her blockading duties. By July 1915, her funnels were collapsing, while her boilers and main bulkheads were in poor condition. A major refit was necessary, but *Niobe* was too old to make it worthwhile. She returned to Halifax and never put to sea again. Instead, she was paid off in September and became a depot ship. Although the Admiralty offered a replacement newer by three years, the RCN simply did not have the sailors to man her. By now, the navy was largely involved in another role: coastal patrol and protection of shipping.

Halifax

Despite its excellent location for conducting defence of trade operations in the North Atlantic, Halifax was ill-prepared to carry them out. Its dockyard facilities and staff were in old and cramped buildings, the result of the government's vacillating and inconsistent attitude towards the development of the RCN since its creation in 1910. Rear Admiral R.S. Phipps-Hornby, commander-in-chief, North America and West Indies Station, reported in June 1915 that the facilities could only meet the requirements of fishery protection vessels and had no modern machinery.

Phipps-Hornby noted the dockyard could only carry out minor repairs on warships; larger work would have to be done by the Halifax Graving Dock Company, a commercial operation, which specialized in merchant ships and did not "necessarily give priority to naval work and their charges are extremely high." Facilities at the RN's dockyard on Bermuda were superior. Yet, he selected Halifax as the main base for his ships, due to its location, ease of entering its harbour and communications facilities.

After the First Canadian Contingent sailed from Quebec to Britain in October 1914, all subsequent troopships departed from Halifax. The presence of thousands of soldiers—if only temporarily—as well as thousands of British and Canadian sailors and merchant seamen, overwhelmed local authorities and concerned citizens. There were simply too many servicemen to be looked after during their off-duty hours by too few citizens willing to invite them into their homes. Coupled with a lack of entertainment facilities—a large

recreation hut erected by the YMCA opposite Government House on Barrington Street was about all there was—it left little opportunity for service personnel to relax. And then the provincial government compounded the problem by closing all city bars.

Prior to the war, Halifax had been exempt from various federal and provincial statutes outlawing alcohol. During the war, the same small minds that had agitated for the Temperance Acts pressured the provincial authorities to rescind Halifax's exemptions. The reformers succeeded and, on July 1, 1916, every bar in the city closed. Now servicemen had no place to even buy a beer. Amazingly, the outcry against the new law was not based on the fact that it deprived sailors and soldiers of a well-earned drink, but that it would deprive liquor wholesalers and retailers of their business and throw their employees out of work.

As it would be again during the Second World War, the government action was a mistake. Drinking establishments simply went underground, where they were known as "blind pigs," offering spirits of questionable provenance and quality. These surreptitious drinking holes were usually connected to another off-duty pastime frequently associated with sailors—brothels. Like any port city, Halifax had always had its share of prostitutes, but before the war they were generally confined to streetwalkers and to small, dingy establishments which operated behind drawn blinds along Water Street and in the shadow of Citadel Hill.

In his popular history of the city, *Halifax: Warden of the North*, Thomas H. Raddall described what happened next:

"The local drabs were not enough for this male swarm. Into the city poured a stream of eager prostitutes from every part of Canada, but especially from Montreal. These professionals set themselves up, in squads of three or four, in small "cigarette shops"—they had a stock of honest tobacco and matches, but the windows were obscured by large cardboard cigarette advertisements, and there were always two or three narrow inner dens furnished with a red lamp, a couch, and a bowl of disinfectant. These opened for business in the old naughty quarters, but soon appeared along the northern ends of Gottingen and Barrington streets towards the old north railway station and about the dockyard and the sidings where the troop trains lay."

The U-Boat Threat

The reason for the RCN's change of mission to coastal patrol and shipping protection was German submarines, or *unterseebooten*, hence U-boats. The German U-boat war began in earnest on February 1, 1915, against merchant vessels, including neutrals, in British home waters, with the aim of starving Britain into submission. This action met with considerable success at first, as few effective anti-submarine weapons had yet been developed. The number of sinkings rose dramatically and by the summer of 1915 had reached almost one hundred a month. Despite these losses, the Admiralty still did not initiate the convoy system—a time-proven method of reducing shipping losses—for

merchant ships, which continued to sail independently. The only ships that received escorts were troopships.

But the political cost to Germany was great. When *U-20* torpedoed the Cunard liner *Lusitania* within sight of the Irish coast in broad daylight on May 7, 1915, there was universal condemnation. Later that month, British officials warned Canada that German U-boats might be expected shortly in the northwest Atlantic. This was followed in June with the suggestion that Canada should establish coastal patrols with small craft obtained locally and “rapidly increase” this patrol service to deal with any submarines that might reach Canadian waters. How could the tiny, underfunded RCN possibly accomplish such a major task?

The Tin-Pot Navy

The resources of the head of the navy, Rear Admiral Charles Kingsmill, to deal with the U-boat threat were practically non-existent. While a parsimonious government dithered over the expense of purchasing suitable ships, the acquisition of additional private yachts provided some short-term relief. Toronto millionaire John Craig Eaton sold his family yacht, *Florence*, to the government for one dollar, an offer that had initially been rebuffed in August 1914. Commissioned under the same name, she was the only Canadian yacht to join the RCN. Three more American yachts followed, commissioned as HMC Ships *Grilse*, *Hochelaga* and *Stadacona*. Armed with torpedo tubes and 3- and 6-pounder guns, along with the occasional 12-pounder, they remained among the most useful of the navy’s patrol craft until the end of the war.

By September 1915, the RCN had the three commissioned vessels, augmented by nine smaller auxiliaries, available for patrols along the coasts of Nova Scotia and the defence of Halifax—where an anti-submarine net now stretched across the harbour entrance—while the remaining commissioned ships were assigned to the Gulf of St. Lawrence Patrol. Suddenly, Germany discontinued her unrestricted U-boat campaign on September 1, 1915. Yet, in only eight months German submarines had sunk nearly one million tons of Allied shipping. U-boats had proven themselves to be a significant weapon of war; Germany might have to use them again—and she did.

After initially discouraging all Canadian offers for naval ships, in November 1916, the Admiralty advised the RCN to increase its east coast patrol force to thirty-six ships mounting 12-pounder guns. It also stated that it could do nothing more than provide an officer to advise or take command. Angered, the government responded by noting that Britain had said the Canadian war effort should be based on soldiers and had blocked all proposals by Canada to build warships in the Dominion. Additionally, the RCN had sent every spare gun and volunteer it could find to the RN, with little to show in return.

Kingsmill promptly ordered a dozen trawler-type minesweepers from Canadian Vickers in Montreal (which had assembled ten submarines for the USN the previous year) and Polson Iron Works in Toronto. The Admiralty ordered another two dozen, sent some

trained sailors to Canada—including a few Canadians in RN service—and provided a commander for the east coast patrols, Vice Admiral Sir Charles Coke.

Coke proved to be the worst possible choice for the job and was quickly relieved after alienating officials in both Halifax and Ottawa. While his replacement was on the way, Kingsmill uncharacteristically stepped in and appointed another Canadian, Acting Captain Walter Hose, to the job. Because of the various RN and RCN authorities involved and their sometimes-convoluted chains of reporting and command, Hose had a difficult task ahead of him.

Ocean convoys were the responsibility of an RN rear admiral in Sydney, who reported to London, while coastal convoys and other shipping came under the RCN, which reported to Ottawa. Hose was responsible to provide escorts for all of them, including the initial seaward leg of the ocean convoys. Hose's deputy in Halifax, Commander Edward Newcombe, was in charge of the coastal escort ships stationed there. Another player was Rear Admiral William Storey, a retired RN officer, who was superintendent of the dockyard and reported to Ottawa. As such, he had charge of all local defences, including minesweeping and patrols in his area. The top naval officer in the region was Vice Admiral Sir George Patey, the RN's new commander-in-chief, North America and West Indies Station, who coordinated all British and Canadian authorities in Canada and the United States involved in the protection of shipping.

Kingsmill was often left out in the cold, as the RN continued to regard the RCN as a mere accessory. He had additional problems. His staff was small and inexperienced in the intricacies of proper staff work (as was he; his time had been spent at sea). But his biggest problem was the war on the Western Front, which overshadowed everything he tried to do and completely captured the attention of the politicians.

By 1917 the German high command considered it essential to start another U-boat campaign and, on February 1, Germany proclaimed unrestricted U-boat warfare against all ships found in British waters or bound for Britain. Allied shipping losses mounted rapidly. The British instituted a number of defensive measures—finally agreeing to the convoy system—as well as improvements in anti-submarine warfare such as hydrophones, depth charges, extended minefields and searchlights. Halifax, along with Sydney, became an assembly port for eastbound convoys. The convoys were marshalled and escorted to sea by the RCN, who handed them over to the big cruisers of the RN and USN, which acted as ocean escorts. On arrival in British home waters, destroyers and land-based aircraft met them and took them into port. Sinkings dropped dramatically.

The success of the convoy system led British naval authorities to believe that German U-boats would cross the Atlantic in search of easier targets, perhaps any time after March 1918. They warned Kingsmill, although he could do little to help. Aircraft were required, but the Borden government was not prepared to provide the necessary funding. As a stop-gap measure, the Admiralty ordered thirty-six trawlers and another hundred drifters from Canadian boatyards. Some would be available as early as spring 1918, but Canadian crews would have to man them.

After July 1917, convoys destined for Britain sailed temporarily from Hampton Roads, Virginia, and Sydney. That September, fast convoys of British and American troopships,

as well as big cargo vessels, sailed from Halifax. Once the St. Lawrence River froze, the slow convoys also departed from Halifax, putting an even greater strain on already overburdened port facilities—and on the Halifax patrol flotilla.

The Navy and the Halifax Explosion

At 9:05 am on a cold, clear December 6, 1917, the reality of the First World War was brought home to Halifax. Twenty minutes earlier, the Norwegian ship *Imo* and the French munitions freighter *Mont-Blanc* collided in the narrowest part of Halifax Harbour. Steel grating on steel caused sparks, igniting benzol stored on *Mont-Blanc*'s deck, which seeped into the holds where 2,766 tons of picric acid, TNT and guncotton were crammed together. *Imo* drifted towards Dartmouth, while *Mont-Blanc*, engulfed in flames, drifted towards Richmond's wooden Pier 6.

When *Mont-Blanc*'s volatile mixture exploded, it blew her sixteen hundred metres high and literally shredded the ship, while *Imo* was blown onto the Dartmouth shore. It was the largest man-made, non-nuclear explosion the world has ever seen. The destruction was immense. The blast destroyed everything within eight hundred metres—including the massive Richmond sugar refinery and the drydock—and damaged buildings within sixteen hundred metres—including several port facilities. Across the harbour at Turtle Grove, the Halifax Breweries and the nearby Mi'kmaq village were totally destroyed.

Within seconds, out of a population of less than fifty thousand, almost two thousand people were dead, nine thousand injured—many from flying bits of metal and glass—and 25,000 rendered homeless. Stoves knocked over by the blast ignited shattered wooden houses. Soon blazes burned all over the city's north end. The next day, one of the worst blizzards in years hit the city, adding to the survivors' misery and hampering rescue efforts. Property damage amounted to thirty-five million dollars.

Many city residents blamed the fledgling RCN for the Halifax Explosion, believing it had failed to adequately control shipping in the harbour. Yet, at the individual level, several sailors—Canadian and British—performed acts of heroism immediately before and after the devastating explosion. After *Mont-Blanc* collided with *Imo*, fire broke out in the French ship. *Niobe*'s captain sent his steam pinnace with six volunteers—Stoker Petty Officer Edward Beard and five seamen—under Acting Bosun Albert Mattison to help the stricken vessel.

At the same time as *Niobe*'s steam pinnace headed for *Mont-Blanc*, the captain of the RN cruiser HMS *Highflyer* sent his whaler to see if anything could be done. Acting Commander Tom Triggs took six sailors with him. When Triggs got to *Mont-Blanc*, now engulfed in thirty-metre high flames, he boarded the tug *Stella Maris* and conferred with her captain. Leaving the crews of the tug and *Niobe*'s pinnace to get a line to the burning ship, Triggs returned to the whaler.

As the whaler was pulling towards *Imo*, about 275 metres away, *Mont-Blanc* exploded. The force of the explosion blew *Niobe*'s pinnace and its crew to pieces, while the only

person to survive on the whaler was Able Seaman William Becker. He was later found on the Dartmouth shore. These Canadian and British sailors were fully aware of the hazardous nature of their task. By their devotion to duty, they sacrificed their lives trying to save the lives of others.

The explosion also set the ocean-going tug *Musquash* on fire. *High Flyer's* captain asked another tug to take *Musquash* in tow, but the crew were unwilling to board the disabled vessel. Two British sailors, Thomas Davis and Robert Stones, volunteered to go aboard *Musquash*, now broken loose from her moorings. They secured a line and the tug towed *Musquash* into the middle of the harbour. Then they went forward, pulled the ammunition—by now badly scorched—away from the flames and threw it overboard. The tender *W.H. Lee* arrived and Davis and Stones broke down doors to allow *Lee's* fire hoses to put out the fire. The sailors' actions subdued the fire and prevented further damage and loss of life, as the ammunition could have exploded at any time.

Mattison, Beard, Triggs, Becker, Davis and Stones received the Albert Medal. The medal—in memory of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband—was awarded to those who, "in saving or endeavouring to save the lives of others from shipwreck or other peril of the sea, endangered their own lives." It was later extended to saving life on land.

While the disaster was unfolding in the harbour, two navy divers were working underwater off the dockyard pier. Six men manned the hand-operated air pumps under the watchful eye of Chief Master-at-Arms John Gammon. When *Mont-Blanc* blew up, one diver was in the water and the other was descending a ladder. The explosion killed five of the six sailors manning the pumps, but both divers and Gammon survived.

The surviving sailor, Able Seaman Walter Critch, realized that he had to get air to the divers immediately. Although the pump was undamaged, the pump house roof had collapsed onto it. Critch was unable to clear the fallen roof, so he squeezed in between it and the pump and gave a mighty heave upwards with his shoulders. He moved bits of wreckage off the pump wheels and, with one hand holding up the collapsed roof, started the pump with the other.

The piston slowly began to suck in air. It usually took six men working in relays to work the pump, but somehow Critch managed single-handedly to start a trickle of air going to the divers. At the same time, Gammon rushed to the ladder to get the divers up and their face masks open. For their quick actions, Critch received the Meritorious Service Medal (Naval), while Gammon was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

The explosion badly damaged *Niobe*, several naval installations and the RNCC. At the College, although the outer walls remained standing, interior walls and ceilings collapsed and windows shattered. Many of the cadets and staff were injured, especially by flying glass. Two cadets each lost the sight of one eye. A few days later, the cadets went home on Christmas leave, to reassemble two months later at Kingston's Royal Military College to complete the year. The RNCC opened in Esquimalt in August 1918—never to return to Halifax—and then closed in 1922.

The Halifax Patrols

For sailors posted to *Niobe* for dockyard duties and maintenance it was a frustrating experience. Long days of cleaning, chipping and painting were interrupted occasionally by ceremonial functions, usually as guards of honour and to hold the crowds back each time a new draft of soldiers departed for overseas. According to rating A.H. Wickens, it made their “bellies full of being left behind” and “sat on [their] dignities.” As members of the senior service, Wickens was particularly displeased sailors had to present arms with fixed bayonets to the departing soldiers, whom he referred to as “those monkeys.” To make matters worse, after each troopship left, the sailors had to march back the three kilometres to the dockyard, during which they were “the victims of much booing and name calling such as: ‘home guards and slackers, when are you going over with the real men?’”

By mid-1918, Captain Walter Hose had a hundred small ships, working out of Halifax, Sydney and St. John’s. They performed the unglamorous but essential tasks of ensuring the harbour approaches were clear of enemy ships and mines, convoy assembly and the initial stage of convoy escort. The small ships were undermanned and poorly equipped. Hose needed 2,300 sailors to do his job, but he only had fifteen hundred. The return of two hundred Canadian naval reservists, along with the addition of three hundred Newfoundland naval reservists and a few RN specialists helped, but still left him a couple of hundred short. The warship side was just as bad. Hose did not have one vessel that mounted a gun that could get within effective range of an enemy submarine before the Canadian ship would in all likelihood be sunk. He needed fast ships, like sloops and destroyers, not trawlers. But none were available from either the RN or USN, although the Americans did send six sub-chasers and two torpedo boats to Halifax to operate under Canadian control.

U-156

In May 1918, U-boats started arriving in North American waters. After successes off the U.S. coast, *U-156* moved into Canadian waters. On August 2, she stopped the four-masted schooner *Dornfontein* in the Bay of Fundy and set her afire. Over the next two days, seven more schooners were sunk along the Nova Scotia coast. Halifax was in an uproar. Convoy HC-12 was preparing to sail; seventeen ships carrying 12,500 Canadian and American soldiers. Enemy subs could be waiting to pounce right outside the harbour entrance, or have laid minefields in the two hundred kilometres of continental shelf.

Despite the threat, the convoy sailed from Halifax on the afternoon of August 4, led by minesweeping trawlers and sub-chasers, with additional trawlers and drifters as close escort. Unfortunately, the close escorts could not keep up with the troopships and gradually fell behind. Fortunately, *U-156* was further down the south shore, where she

sank three fishing schooners. The convoy got out of Canadian waters safely, more by good luck than by good seamanship.

On the early morning of August 5, the British tanker *Luz Blanca* departed Halifax for Mexico. Her master ignored warnings to wait until dusk to sail and to zigzag. Just before noon, about fifty-five kilometres south of the Sambro light, a torpedo from *U-156*—on its way to Halifax—found its mark and slammed into her hull. Damaged, the tanker turned about while her crew fought the sub with their 12-pounder. Eventually, the *Luz Blanca* lay dead in the water in flames. Her crew took to the lifeboats and bravely began rowing for the Sambro light, twenty-seven kilometres away.

A nearby steamer witnessed the attack and sent out the alarm. The trawlers and drifters returning from convoy HC-12 got the message and came in response, but ended up in the wrong position and found nothing. The sub-chasers were luckier and picked up the survivors from the lifeboats five hours after the attack. No trace of *U-156* was found; in fact, she had headed south immediately after the attack and was long gone when the would-be rescuers arrived.

The British commander-in-chief quickly suspended Halifax as a convoy terminal. Future convoys assembled in Sydney and American ports and met far out to sea. Control of local shipping was tightened. On August 7, Admiral Kingsmill issued a tactical instruction to the Halifax patrol, the first ever. It stated that although the Canadian ships would be outgunned by the U-boats, they should press home the attack, fire at the pressure hull, zigzag to avoid being hit and try to cause some damage. The instruction speculated that the subs were a long way from home and, as their mission was to sink merchant shipping, they would probably submerge to avoid the risk of being damaged. Then they could be attacked with depth charges.

Then *U-156* returned, this time off Cape Breton. The sub captured the steam trawler *Triumph* near Canso and sent her crew off in a rowboat. The sub's captain put a gun and some of his submariners aboard her. The instant mini-raider was well-known on the fishing grounds and approached several schooners with ease, sinking six. The German crew scuttled the trawler when they ran out of coal. Meanwhile, *Triumph's* crew rowed ashore at Canso and raised the alarm.

On August 25, west of St. Pierre, *U-156* sank another small trawler, followed by the capture of four schooners. As she began to sink them with explosives, a small, four-ship Canadian flotilla came into view, spread out in a search line about 6,500 metres apart. HMCS *Cartier* led the group, made up of her sister ship *Hochelaga* and two trawlers. From 6,500 metres away, *Hochelaga* spotted two schooners and steamed towards them to warn of the enemy sub in the area. Suddenly, one of the schooners disappeared, leaving the low silhouette of the big U-boat clearly visible.

In reaction, *Hochelaga's* captain, Lieutenant Robert Legate, immediately ordered full speed ahead, came about and raced back towards *Cartier*, completely ignoring Kingsmill's direction to press home the attack against all enemy subs. At least the flotilla leader in *Cartier* obeyed his admiral's instructions and ordered all ships to go for the sub at full speed, as soon as he read Legate's signal "enemy in sight." But by then *U-156* had already submerged and the four warships searched through the wreckage of the schooners, without any luck.

The incident had the potential to add an RCN laurel to the long list of stirring RN actions at sea—a small, outclassed *David* steaming full speed ahead towards an enemy Goliath, guns blazing. Successful or not, it was the type of one-sided battle on which legends were built and could have earned Legate a Victoria Cross. Instead, he was court martialled.

Legate was an experienced sailor. He had been on active service since the start of the war, was commissioned in 1915 and held command at sea for nearly two years. Yet, at the moment of truth, his nerve had failed him. He was found guilty of failing to “use his utmost execution to bring his ship into action” and dismissed from the navy. The one chance for the fledgling RCN’s moment of glory in the face of the enemy had passed, and it was not to come again in this war.

Meanwhile, *U-156* and her sister submarines continued to cut a swath of destruction off the east coast of Canada, resulting in six more sinkings in August. On her way home to Germany, *U-156* hit a mine off Scotland and sank. That left only the huge 1,700-ton cargo submarine *Deutschland* off Nova Scotia, now renamed *U-155*. After laying minefields near the Sambro Light and Peggy’s Cove, she sank a trawler. For safety, the Quebec convoys were now routed north through the Strait of Belle Isle, although all subsequent convoys from both Quebec and Sydney got through unharmed.

The appearance of U-boats off the coast of Nova Scotia caused panic across the province. Boats were being sunk with sight of the shore and the RCN seemed helpless to respond. The press ranted and railed against the navy, but there was little it could do with tiny ships, untrained crews and its biggest guns shipped to Britain for the RN. There were only eleven naval vessels in commission on the entire Canadian east coast, and only five of them could put to sea, with the remaining six restricted to operations close inshore.

Naval department officials scrambled to find additional ships. They called up a postal service steamer and two hydrographic survey ships, and quietly acquired seven wooden trawlers from their American civilian owners, which were converted to minesweepers to keep the harbour approaches clear. The RCN had ordered twelve minesweeping anti-submarine steel trawlers in the spring of 1917, six to be built in Montreal and six in Toronto, hoping they would be ready by the summer. The modest, forty-metre, 350-ton Battle class vessels were named in honour of the battles and towns where soldiers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force lived, fought and died on the Western Front. Each trawler had a crew of eighteen and mounted one 12-pounder gun.

The U-boat threat caused concern about Halifax’s seaward defences and, at the insistence of the new British commander-in-chief at Halifax, Vice Admiral Sir Montague Browning, a new submarine net was installed in July. It was not until mid-1917 that the Allies had adopted a comprehensive convoy system, despite the desires of the admirals to engage in dramatic fleet actions on the high seas. But it made little sense to “keep the sea lanes open” in the vast empty spaces of the North Atlantic, when it was merchant shipping and troopships that needed protection. Throughout history, convoys had proven their value while independently sailed freighters suffered huge losses. Convoys from Halifax to Britain—designated HX (Homeward from Halifax)—began on August 21 and included all ships capable of making 12 ½ knots or more.

In the end, the adoption of the convoy system was a key element in the Allied victory over Germany, and Halifax was a key player in the convoys. Contrary to what had happened previously—when merely the threat of a U-boat nearby could close Halifax for hours or even days—ships now sailed on time by the most direct route and were protected during the entire crossing, usually by a navy cruiser or an armed merchant-cruiser against German surface raiders. Anti-submarine vessels concentrated in coastal waters, where U-boats hunted their prey.

The responsibility for providing convoy protection as convoys formed and sailed from North American ports fell to RCN local escort forces, which remained woefully undermanned, underequipped and undertrained for the task. And there was always the all-too-valid Canadian concern that the RN would try and step in to control the RCN's assets, as limited as they were. It was not long in coming. Once local convoy protection became a major concern in Canadian territorial waters, the Admiralty characteristically tried to assume direct control, while ignoring Canadian autonomy. For the time being at least, the RCN managed to win its case.

Although several ships had been sunk in Canadian waters, the majority of them were fishing vessels. Their loss was certainly tragic—especially the deaths of the fishermen aboard them—but it did not hinder the war effort. Convoys were the only answer to the U-boat plague at the time and, in the end, the tiny tin-pots of the Halifax patrols made the convoys possible.

The End of the War

As the war began to wind down, there was evidence of a certain restlessness among naval and military personnel in Halifax. Incidents of brawling between residents and servicemen, as well as theft by service personnel increased. In May 1918, an ugly episode occurred that quickly grew from a minor incident to a major one, a foreshadowing of events at the end of the Second World War, but on a much smaller scale. It began when a sailor was caught shoplifting in a Barrington Street store by an employee and arrested by a beat cop. The seaman called out to his buddies, who unhesitatingly attacked the policeman. In response, the police officer summoned help by blowing his whistle. As more police, sailors and soldiers piled on, a mini-riot ensued within twenty minutes.

The mob of sailors and soldiers began beating every policeman in sight, and then chased the rest back to the police station in the basement of City Hall. Others—merchant seamen, longshoremen, prostitutes, local ne'er-do-wells—quickly joined them. At the time, a new market place was being built on the upper side of nearby Market Street, which provided a ready supply of bricks to throw through the windows of the police station and City Hall.

The police tried to sally forth on several occasions, but were beaten back each time by a heavy bombardment of bricks. Meanwhile, some of the mob had broken into City Hall, where they destroyed everything they could before attempting to start a fire on top of

the police station, using municipal documents that they had heaped on the floor. The rioters did not succeed in this endeavour and returned to smashing windows. They only fled when a body of armed sailors and Royal Marines from an RN cruiser anchored in the harbour appeared on the scene.

By the end of the war, the RCN consisted of more than a hundred warships—although most of them were quite small—and had 9,600 officers and men serving in it. In addition, it had formed the short-lived Royal Canadian Naval Air Service—the first Canadian air force. But in the minds of most Canadians, the RCN had done little towards winning the war. It was an opinion shared by others. In 1930, the prestigious *Cambridge History of the British Empire* sniffed with disdain that “Canada’s...naval contribution to the World War was so small...that no Canadian naval history need be recorded here.”

Instead, it was the soldiers of the Canadian Corps, the victors at Vimy Ridge and the Empire’s shock troops of the closing battles of the war, known as “Canada’s Hundred Days,” that received the accolades of politicians and the public—both at home and abroad. It remained to be seen if the government had learned any lessons about sea power during the war, especially the need for a base of professional sailors in peacetime, as well as the necessity for a solid industrial base to build warships. Canadians would find the answer soon enough—and it was certainly not what the navy wanted.

After four long, hard years of war, the last thing the Canadian government and the Canadian people wanted to talk about was the future of the armed forces and preparations for another war. Although the British continued to push for the idea of a single imperial navy made up of contributions from the Empire, Prime Minister Borden refused outright to consider such a proposal. He had been blind-sided once too often by the self-interest of the British during the war and vowed it would not happen again. As far as the navy was concerned, Canada would go it alone.

There was a long way to go. After the war, the RCN was reduced to five hundred officers and men. All that remained at Halifax was the hulk of *Niobe*, still being used as a depot ship and bearing the scars of the 1917 explosion. She shared this latter quality with much of the dockyard, which was also in bad shape after four years of continuous overuse. The one bright spark for the navy—the establishment of a Canadian naval air service—had been extinguished after just three short months of existence (see HMHPS Historical Paper No. 3: Byrd at Baker’s Point).

It would take another world war—one far more devastating than the First—before the Royal Canadian Navy realized its full potential.