

Unsung Hero

or

“The Life of *Eastore*”

This is the story of one ship among the group of vessels which together provide those essential support services without which the fighting ships of the Royal Canadian Navy(RCN) would be unable to function. I refer specifically to that class known as Canadian Naval Auxiliary Vessels(CNAV) while recognizing that many other groups of small ships and boats in the support role are also vital to the very existence of the naval fleet. Every one and their crews were, and are, unsung heroes working generally below the radar and, in stark contrast to our fighting ships, leaving little trace on the public consciousness.

I have chosen as my specific subject the good ship *Eastore*, in part because I still remember her plying the waters in and around Halifax in the early post-WW2 period, and I will begin at the beginning.

Once upon a time, before WW1, a small shipyard started in business in Brunswick, Georgia, calling itself the Brunswick Marine Construction Corp. It produced two or three small vessels annually, generally fish boats, tugs, small freighters and the occasional yacht all within 30-50 feet in length. With WW2 looming and the pressures growing for greater shipbuilding capacity, the company was awarded a contract by the U.S. Maritime Commission for the construction of an emergency yard. However, as a result of certain “management weaknesses”, the emergency yard was turned over to another company and Brunswick Marine reverted to just building a few small ships although these turned out to be a good deal larger than their pre-war vessels. Between 1943 and 1946 they produced nine 500-ton YO class oil barges for the USN and three 560-ton FS class freight and supply ships for the US Army.

The first of these three Army ships, designated FS 552, was not delivered until November 1944 and was promptly turned over to the RCN. The reasons for this are lost in the mists of time -- perhaps she was excess to the requirements of the US Army so late in the war or it could have been in response to an outstanding request by Canada. Whatever the reason, she was very quickly steamed up the eastern seaboard to Halifax -- a potentially hazardous run even this late in the war - - and was commissioned as HMCS *Eastore* Z56, on 7 December, 1944, for service as a supply vessel on the east coast. Her first CO was Cdr. J.E. McQueen, RCNVR, who may have brought her up from Georgia and conducted brief workups before

handing her over to a Skpr/Lt., RCNR, on 2 January, 1945. The attached rare photo, taken early in 1945 by Lt. H.S. Lee probably from on board HMCS *Digby* and understandably somewhat blurred, shows *Eastore*'s pendant number Z56 on her starboard bow allowing for positive identification.



1. HMCS Eastore off Halifax 1945
(From the collection of H.S.(Tim) Lee courtesy of Ryan Lee)

The name “Eastore”, unlike the names of most RCN ships, does not appear to honour a Canadian city, town or river, or that of any other country for that matter, at least not that I have been able to find. The name does however have an interesting historic connection in that it is an accepted version of the name Eostre or Estre, the ancient Germanic goddess of fertility, or dawn and rebirth, as well as the rising light of day and spring. It is of course the basis of the word Easter. It seems entirely appropriate to the birth of a new ship and I like to think that whoever was responsible for assigning it to *Eastore* was a closet classic scholar. However the truth may be much more mundane for *Eastore* was joining a fleet that already included an HMCS *Westore* and may simply have been assigned a name that was a variation on the same theme. Where the name *Westore* came from is a

complete mystery -- in fact the history of *Westore* herself is a total blank with even her pendant number unrecorded.

HMCS *Eastore* served out the remainder of the war as a supply vessel on the east coast and was paid off on 8 April 1946. In common with others in her category that were retained for post-war service, she was promptly redesignated a Canadian Naval Auxiliary Vessel, becoming CNAV *Eastore*, AKS 515, under the command of a Master who at that time was generally a retired RCN(R) officer. She spent the next eighteen years fulfilling a wide range of duties on the east coast carrying everything from people to wrecked aircraft. She did on occasion travel farther afield with probably her most distant venture being Spithead in 1953 where she served as tender to the Canadian Coronation Squadron. Then two years later, when ships of the U.S. military ceased supplying the base at Goose Bay and the Clarke Steamship Company took over that responsibility, the *Eastore* provided assistance, completing four trips through the summer of 1955. In 1961 she headed north to Frobisher Bay carrying Army-style buildings and personnel for the construction of new barracks. After a total of almost twenty years of faithful service in the RCN, *Eastore* was paid off and sold in 1964.

At this point *Eastore* appears to simply disappear. There may be some record of her sale tucked away in dusty old records somewhere but, even with all the power of the internet, I have so far been unable to locate it. However there are a few traces to be found out there in cyberspace that allow glimpses of her second life.

First and foremost was the need to locate where on the face of the globe she had gotten to. The vital clue came in the form of a 35mm slide that I was able to acquire showing her alongside the wall in Nassau in the Bahamas. The photo had been taken in 1966 just two years after she was sold. In it she wears a smart and apparently fresh black-and-white paint job and looks to have been totally refurbished to carry both passengers and cargo. The Bahamas Maritime Authority have confirmed that she was part of the fleet of the Port Department headquartered in Nassau. Further clues to the nature of her duties with that organization were found in a random fashion and, taken chronologically, they provide not only an insight into *Eastore's* second life but also a glimpse into some aspects of the Bahamian scene from which your average cruise ship passenger is well shielded.

Two years after that 1966 photo, a Reuters News Agency release, datelined Nassau-Bahamas, appeared in the August 18, 1968, issue of the The Salt Lake Tribune of Salt Lake City, Utah. It reads in part:

“Sixteen armed police Saturday stood watch over a shipload of Haitian illegal immigrants who stormed the bridge of a ship taking

them back to Haiti. One Haitian was killed and 11 wounded when guards opened fire on them as they tried to storm the bridge in an attempt to avoid being sent back to the land of President Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier. A new crew was put aboard the Bahamas government owned ship Eastore today after the original crew refused to continue the journey to Haiti following the uprising. The ship was expected to reach the Haitian port of Gonaives early Sunday morning. A government spokesman here said the trouble began when the Haitians -- 128 men and 82 women -- broke out of the hold of the 560-ton ship Eastore in an attempt "to overthrow the crew and subdue the police guard." He said the police were forced to open fire in defense of the Bahamas government owned ship.

Clearly *Eastore* was leading a more hazardous second life than her first!



2. Eastore in Nassau 1966
(original 35mm slide owned by the author).

She appears again in a photo circa 1970 alongside in Nassau. By that time the Bahamas were becoming a major transshipment point for the movement of

Columbian cocaine to Florida ports in the U.S. This was due in part to the dispersed nature of the Bahamian land mass comprising some 700 atolls and cays, mostly uninhabited and spread over an area of almost 14,000 square kilometres, which provide a high degree of security within a short boat ride of Miami. By 1978, through murder and extortion, Carlos Lehder, co-founder of the Medellin drug cartel, had gained complete control over the small island of Norman's Cay in Exuma which became the chief base for smuggling cocaine into the U.S. until finally being dislodged around 1982. The large Haitian diaspora in the Bahamas, as a consequence of many tens of thousands fleeing from a long succession of oppressive regimes in Haiti, played a significant role in this movement of cocaine and the *Eastore* continued to be employed in the risky business of repatriating these illegal Haitian immigrants. Press releases indicate this activity, often accompanied by support from the Royal Bahamas Defence Force (RBDF), a purely naval force, going on at least into the late 1990s.

The ire of illegal Haitian immigrants was not the only hazard faced by *Eastore*. In 1975 the Bahamas passed a law making it illegal to fish the spiny lobster in waters adjacent to the Bahamas without a permit from the Nassau government. The restriction was to be enforced by Bahamian patrol boats and covered an area well over 100,000 square miles of the continental shelf. This infuriated Florida lobstermen, most of whom were Cuban refugees who for years had fished these waters and now saw their livelihood and their investments endangered. They vowed to defy the Bahamian ban and use arms to prevent arrest and seizure of their boats and catches. Following a retaliatory attack on a Bahamian ship in Miami, the government of the Bahamas was forced to make official representation to the U.S. government to take necessary steps to ensure the safety of their ships, including *Eastore*, when visiting the port of Miami.

After years of rancour between the Haitian and Bahamian governments over the migrant issue and the associated drug trade, finally in 1995 they reached an accord on a plan of action. It is worth reading the following extract in the context of *Eastore*'s long-lasting involvement in repatriating Haitians. It is taken from Volume Two of "Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People" by Craton and Saunders.

"Just three months after Aristide had been returned to power, on January 12, 1995, the Bahamas government signed an accord in Port-au-Prince by which the Haitian government agreed to the enforced repatriation of eight hundred illegal immigrants per month over the following year. In return, the Bahamian government agreed "to continue the regularisation of Haitian nationals who have been residing continually in The Bahamas for 10 years or more and can

furnish evidence to this effect” and “in accordance with its Constitution to extend the benefit of the protection of its laws and institutions to all children born in the Bahamas of Haitian parents”.

As the result of unprecedentedly thorough sweeps of the Haitian shanty yards, by the end of 1995 Bahamian officials were able to claim the detention and repatriation of fifty-six hundred illegal Haitians, some 75 percent of whom were males. Those Haitians detained at Carmichael were escorted under guard back to their homes and into town so they could close bank accounts and sell household goods or arrange for them to be sent back to Haiti before being shipped to Port-au-Prince, at first in the tender MV Eastore and then, far more quickly and efficiently, by jet planes chartered from Carnival Airlines.”

That is the last clue I have been able to find of *Eastore*'s activities in the Bahamas. All on-line searches for her whereabouts now show her status as “unknown” or “decommissioned or lost”. However it may be relevant that in 2015 the RBDF took delivery of their newest and largest vessel, HMBS *Lawrence W Major*, primarily for use in disaster relief and recovery. At close to the size of *Eastore* with the added benefit of a roll-on/roll-off capability, she is well-suited to taking over many of the tasks performed by *Eastore* who, by the end of the millennium, would have been fifty-five years old. Although a spokesperson for the Bahamas Maritime Authority have advised me that *Eastore* “may” have been scrapped, as of the time of writing (Jun.2018) I have been unable to confirm this or to establish the date at which she was taken out of service. Repeated enquiries to the Nassau Port Department, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, and the Nassau Guardian have failed to solicit even a reply. Attempts through personal contacts have been equally fruitless. If anyone who reads this resides in, visits or has a reliable contact in the Bahamas, I would welcome any help they can provide in determining *Eastore*'s ultimate fate.

In spite of the many frustrations along the way, researching the life of *Eastore* has turned out to be far more interesting and complex than I had anticipated when I set out on this task. From her genesis in Georgia through delivery to the U.S.Army, transfer to the Canadian Government, commissioning into the RCN as HMCS *Eastore*, redesignation as a Canadian Naval Auxiliary Vessel, sale to the Government of the Bahamas and the adventures arising therefrom as M/V *Eastore*, it has been a merry chase. Her life has taken her from the cold and often stormy waters of the North Atlantic to the warm seas and gentle clime (hurricanes excepted!) of the Caribbean. Along the way her duties have run

the gamut from the routine and placid to the unusual and hazardous. She truly deserves her place among the unsung heroes of the sea.

As I finish this little story the clock on the wall in front of my desk sounds four bells announcing the cocktail hour. It has been doing so for seventy-three years. How *Eastore's* ship's clock came to be on my wall in 2018 is a story for another day.

Capt. J.G.R. (Rod) Hutcheson, RCN(ret'd)

Chelsea, Que.

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