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Latest cargo-shifting incident a pale imitation of 1965 drama

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The issue of which and where lethal armaments lurk off Vancouver Island's west coast was revived as recently as 2005.

Earlier this month a China-bound freighter was forced to put in at Ladysmith so that its cargo of uranium concentrate, several drums of which had shifted in stormy seas, could be examined. This isn't the only time in B.C.'s history that dangerous cargo and heavy weather have challenged ships' crews.

For years, the Royal Canadian Navy dumped obsolete munitions in 6,000 feet, 200 miles off Vancouver Island's west coast, latterly using civilian crews to man its naval auxiliary vessel, HMCS Laymore. In June 1965 the navy refuted an anonymous informant's charge that the 935-ton ship was unfit for such duty, saying that she was halfway through a refit to equip her for her new duties as a scientific vessel with the Pacific Naval Laboratory. As her engines weren't yet functional, she and her cargo of aging high-explosives would be towed to the dumping grounds.

"The Laymore is the only ship we can use that has a proper hold to carry the ammunition, and she can use her electric winches to lift it over the side and lower it almost to surface level -- then drop it a ton at a time. She has been doing our dumping (every three years or so) for many years."

That was on June 1, 1965. Seventeen days later, HMCS Laymore was again in the news, bold black headlines proclaiming, "Seamen survive 25-foot-waves, 70 mph winds; four hours of terror on raft; explosives ship still adrift off West Coast."

By then her 17-man crew had been safely removed from their rubber life raft but Laymore, with 149 tons of munitions in her hold, remained adrift with a jammed rudder. She'd almost foundered in a 70-mph gale that snapped the 1,300-foot towline connecting her to the naval auxiliary tug Clifton when about 35 miles southwest of Tofino.

When 48 pallets of ammo shifted, Capt. John Francois, 59, a veteran naval officer of the Second World War, ordered his crew to abandon ship at 5:15 p.m. After four terrifying hours adrift in 25-foot waves, they were picked up (after three tries) and the naval tug Heatherton was standing by Laymore until she could take her in tow.

The single injury among her crew was First Officer Leonard Walsh who injured his back while conducting a final survey of her decks to see that all the men were accounted for.

"We rolled the raft over the side of the ship and pulled the pin which automatically inflates it," Capt. Francois told reporters. "The raft was still secured to the ship when we jumped. There was no panic. When they were told to jump -- they jumped.

"And nobody missed the raft. I wanted to be the last man to go but I was pushed in second last. Everybody was soaking wet and it was damn cold. We were all wearing life-jackets, and were in sight of a ship during the whole four hours. (But) the rescue was damn near impossible. We were considering the possibility of riding out the storm all night on the raft."

They'd never been alone, the Clifton and the destroyer escort HMCS Mackenzie standing by after making three unsuccessful attempts to pick them up. To calm the seas, Mackenzie dropped an oil slick.

In another interview, Capt. Francois described his crew's conduct as magnificent. "There was no hint of panic although we were all pretty scared. She (the Laymore) was going over between 60 and 70 degrees when we jumped."

He'd been so concerned with his ship foundering, then having to deal with abandoning ship, to worry about her cargo, he said upon his arrival, still shaking, in HMC Dockyard. "She was going over so far and we had no way of controlling her. I don't know enough about explosives to say how dangerous it was or what the possibilities of an explosion were. I just knew we had to get off before she went under."

This wasn't the first time he'd abandoned ship. During the Second World War he'd gone over the side amid exploding depth charges in mid-Atlantic when HMCS Saguenay lost her stern in a collision. "I thought that was bad but last night was worse. The worst night I've ever put in since going to sea more than 40 years ago."

When a dock worker shook his hand and said he was glad that he'd returned safely, Francois replied, "Damn right, so am I."

"You're safer carrying that stuff than you are crossing Douglas Street on a Friday night," pooh-poohed crew member and Rocky Point munitions handler B.J. Harford. "But those waves were pretty high and she was rolling terribly. I tell you, the greatest sight I ever saw in my life was the Clifton when she picked us up" around 9 o'clock.

Crewman Curly Morgan, with 12 years' sea experience, was looking forward to a hot bath and some sleep. He said he'd seen worse seas -- "but never with a cargo like that on board." To him, the 25-foot-high waves had "looked like a hundred feet" high.

The munitions, from the Rocky Point Magazine, consisted mainly of anti-submarine mortar bombs, fuses for three- and four-inch naval guns, obsolete fuses and some demolition charges. Speaking for the navy in response to accusations that sending an unpowered and undermanned Laymore to sea with a cargo of high explosives was "a damned disgrace -- nobody in their right minds would ship 200 tons of TNT on a ship like the Laymore unless

it had its own power," Capt. R.H. Chicken declared, "The Laymore's still afloat, isn't she? She hasn't blown up yet. People have the strangest ideas about ammunition. If they would stop and think with what force a shell leaves a gun they would realize that it takes quite a force to make one explode.

"The explosives on the Laymore were absolutely safe and, had the storm not come up, would have been dumped by now without harm."

"That navy has a lot of questions to be asked on this one," retorted a critical retired officer, "and I don't think they have the answers."

None of those questions and answers he had in mind dealt with the practice of using our Pacific doorstep as a garbage can for expired ordnance that possibly included mustard gas and phosgene, a practice long conducted by military forces around the world.

HMCS Laymore, towed back to port and her cargo returned to the ammo lockers at Rocky Point, returned to full service under her own power until decommissioned; then 32-years-old, she was sold for scrapping in 1976.

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