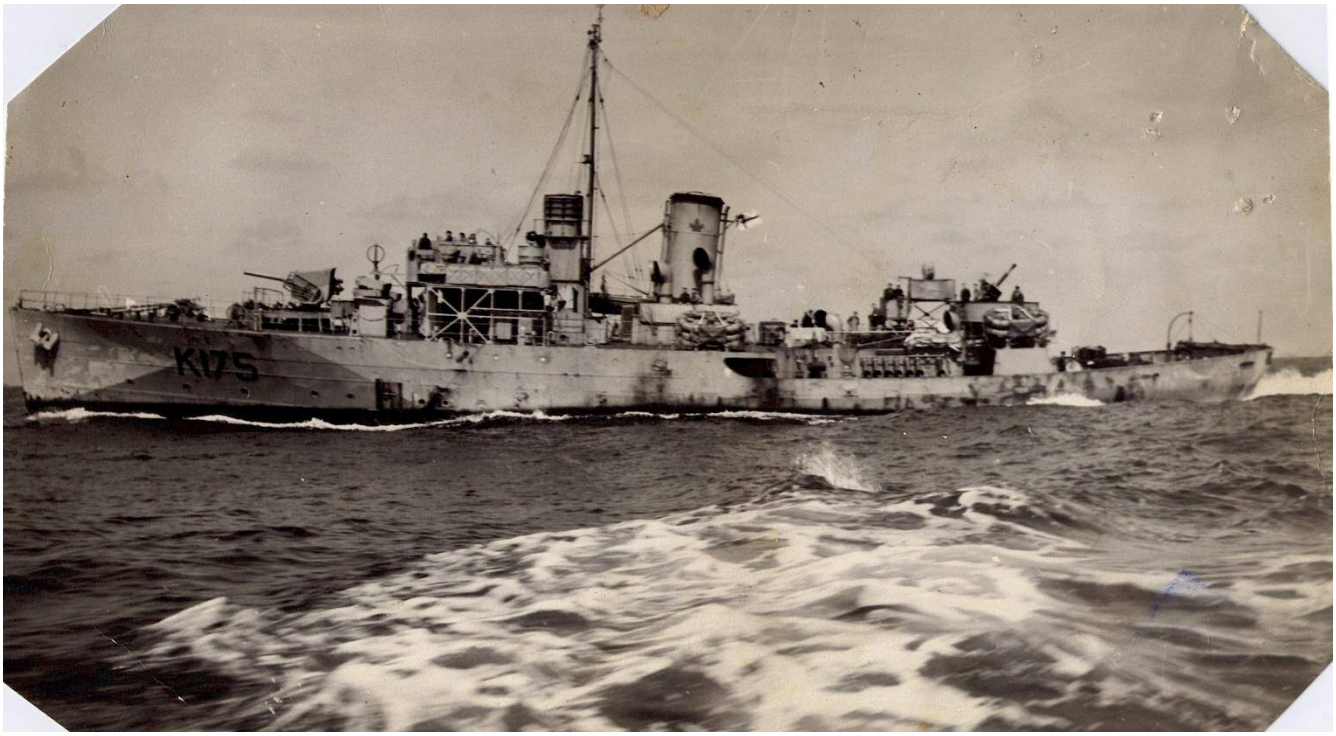
Memories of Life Aboard HMCS Wetaskiwin

(The Wet Ass Queen)



by John (Jack) Armstrong
Telegraphist, RCNVR 1943-1946
Editor - Bob Gregory
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Editorial Comment

The following is the story of service by Jack Armstrong in the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II,. Like so many other veterans, Jack never talked much about his war service. After the war, he saw it simply as time out of his life and his focus turned to making up for what he had missed, friendships, romance, education and starting a career. After chatting with him for a while, I was struck that his war experience represented an important new role carried out by many Canadians in the new Canadian navy, of escorting merchant ships successfully despite packs of U-boats. It was a tough service on a tossing ship in the cold North Atlantic in freezing blowing winds, where falling overboard meant almost certain death and a torpedo attack was always a threat. That work was not glamorous so it was not covered by war reporters .and it made no compelling history. However, it did make Allied victory in 1945 possible. And in the Atlantic war against submarine adversaries, the RCN found its niche for the next 50 years.

Jack, despite being 95 years of age, has an excellent memory and provided me notes of his war service on hand written pages, which amazed me because his eyesight is unfortunately so bad that he could not read what he wrote and at one time wrote eight pages before realizing his pen was without ink. I found it incredible that he could organize his thoughts in perfect order simply by keeping track in his head. His notes, and oral comments and memories are shown in italics, I have added background information in regular print. The vast majority of photos are from Jack's collection. His fellow Telegraphist, Sinbad, was the only one on HMCS Wetaskiwin with a camera, so he would take photos and then send the film to his family to print for himself and several shipmates. Some, particularly ship photos, were issued by the Canadian navy. There were a lot of photos onboard HMCS Alberton, because Jack had little to do on this ship. Other photos are from various Wetaskiwin websites, particularly - www.forposterityssake.ca/Navy/HMCS_WETASKIWIN_K175.htm

The more I explored with Jack his naval service, the more interesting I found his story and the more I learned. Both Jack and I hope that these memories will be of interest and informative to you as well.

- Bob

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HMCS Wetaskiwin
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Introduction

At the beginning of World War II (1939), Germany had invaded and taken over Czechoslovakia and Poland. Soon their powerful, well trained and equipped forces had overrun most of western Europe and were poised to invade England. German bombers were already devastating England's cities and industry. England was poorly prepared except for their indomitable courage. Men could be seen standing on England's eastern beaches equipped with old Boer War and World War I rifles and many with only broom sticks and garden tools.

Help was needed, Canada responded immediately, sending troops and huge quantities of civilian and military supplies. And soon supplies were coming from the United States. Germany was well aware of this flow of desperately needed assistance and dispatched a large number of submarines (usually called U-boats) in an effort to cut off this lifeline.

The aid was being shipped on freighters and tankers sailing mostly individually. They were generally slow and unarmed and if spotted, were easy prey for u-boats. Many were sunk, with a heavy loss of life.

A different strategy was needed. The new strategy involved gathering the merchant ships carrying men and supplies into large groups to become known as "convoys". Each convoy would be protected by a number of warships set up in a screen, to be known as an "Escort Group". The escort ships were especially equipped and trained for anti-submarine warfare. The backbone of the escort groups was a class of ship called the "corvette".

HMCS Wetaskiwin was a corvette destined to serve as part of an escort group.

I originally wanted to join the air force and went to Air Force Recruiting on Sparks Street in early spring, maybe March 1943. They gave me a battery of tests and I passed the aptitude test for pilot training. I was told to expect a call within 7 days. After 7 days and no call, I went with my nephew, Jerry, to the Naval Recruitment centre where we stressed that we wanted to train together and be on the same boat. We were promised this was not a problem. When I returned home, then living in Ottawa, I received a call from the Navy telling me to take a train to Quebec City where I received basic training in April 1943 at HMCS Montcalm by the plains of Abraham. I was seventeen and a half years old. I never saw Jerry again until the end of the war. Later I learned that the Air Force did call, offering to recruit me. The army did likewise as a reservist soldier.(I hardly knew I was enlisted as a Reservist soldier. We viewed it as a Saturday Night Social where a lad under drinking age could get drinks passed through the bar window, to a stool strategically placed outside.)

HMCS Montcalm with recruits

All Royal Canadian Navy's shore-based facilities followed the naming tradition of the Royal Navy, whereby the prefix HMCS was affixed. The entire bases at the deep water ports of Victoria, British Columbia, and Halifax are now referred to as a Canadian Forces Base or CFB but some components of the base are still referred to by their historic name. HMCS Montcalm's personnel provide on-going augmentation to Royal Canadian Navy operations and exercises on ships and at shore establishments on a full and part-time basis. It still operates as such in Quebec City.

Upon arrival I was given a blanket and directed to the barracks. When I entered it was typical naval spic and span but I was hit with the stink of human sweat. I so wanted to quit and return home.

As part of our training our Killick, ["killick", Naval slang for a Leading Seaman, means spare anchor, from the anchor on the rank badge back in the pre-1960's Navy.] –(equivalent to a Sergeant in the Army) rigorously marched us barking out orders, a really tough guy. Once we got over a ridge and no longer visible to the barracks, he told us all to rest and posted a lookout to ensure no one from the barracks came towards us. Now he was the nicest guy you could ask for.

After basic training we were sent to St. Hyacinth, east of Montreal. Our instructor was a Chief Petty

Officer in the Royal Navy and he was so competent and an excellent teacher. We completed a very intense, 6 months, course covering all aspects of radio, from basic theory to circuit design, operation, maintenance and repair, and propagation characteristics for all types of systems we would find aboard ships. If we had problems at 1000 miles out to sea, we were on our own, we could not phone downtown for a friendly repairman. I had rated top in my class of 20 or 30 and was reading Morse Code at 30 words per minute with 100% accuracy consistently. [A pass is 20wpm]

We were allowed to return home on weekends so I would often take the train to Ottawa.

Sailors in formation at HMCS St. Hyacinthe base. (source: Gov't of Canada)

HMCS St. Hyacinthe.

The history of HMCS St. Hyacinthe began in 1941 when it was found necessary to increase the capacity of the naval signal (communication) school (formerly at the Exhibition Grounds in Halifax, Nova Scotia) from 800 to 2,600. No suitable accommodation could be found in eastern Canada, but buildings of Militia Training Centre No. 46 were found available in Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec. It was more economical to add to the existing plant than to build afresh in a new place so this site was chosen. On 1 October 1941, the new signal school was commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy, as HMCS St. Hyacinthe.

The Signal School at St. Hyacinthe, Quebec was instrumental in training thousands of wireless operators during World War II. Modern buildings, spread over a 25 acre site, housed almost 3200 officers, ratings and Wrens (Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service)who were involved in all phases of communication training. In the years prior to WW II, training telegraphists took about a year. After the war started, that period was reduced to approximately 3 months with intensive training. If a student failed his exam after 6 weeks, he would be assigned to either the stoker or seaman trade. After the summer of 1941, with the need for more coders growing rapidly, they were trained as coders. By 1944

St. Hyacinthe was able to turn out highly proficient communicators and by the war's end, St. Hyacinthe was training visual signalmen, wireless telegraphists, coders, radar operators and radio artificers. The Wrens , after their arrival in St. Hyacinthe in 1943, took part in all these courses, with the exception of the one for Radio Artificers.(skilled mechanics in radio equipment)

Facilities at HMCS St. Hyacinthe

EARLY MORNING ROUTE MARCH (Sept. 1943) — Signal School band played a big part in the history of the School. Here they are seen heading the early morning route march in the days when the school was so crowed that not all hands could be used in early morning "Clean ship". Members of the W.R.C.N.S. are directly behind the band.

The above newspaper photo of HMCS St Hyacinthe fits the time period of Jack's Telegraphist training.

St. Hyacinthe Communications Class 1944
(Jack Armstrong, Bottom row, 3rd from left, Bob Jameson, 2nd from left. A friend from Ottawa, 4th from left)

Few of the sailors taking the primary courses at St. Hyacinthe had actual sea experience. Accordingly, great efforts were made to simulate sea conditions as far as possible in their work. Model ships' bridges were built on the roofs of half a dozen buildings at the signal school and the signalmen manned these regularly to carry out ship-to-ship exercises with flags, projectors and semaphore. A "rolling bridge" unofficially known as the "rocking horse" was constructed which simulated both the pitching and the rolling of a ship. This was used to train signalmen in semaphore and its object was not to test the ability of the sailor to withstand seasickness, but to teach him how to maintain his balance and send a legible message from an unsteady platform. "St Hy" was able to turn out a proficient and worthwhile product for the ships and establishments of the navy. .As the war was winding down in early 1945, the communications school closed, having trained over 3000 men and women. HMCS St.-Hyacinthe became a naval discharge centre and then a Naval Radio Laboratory, then decommissioned February 20, 1946.

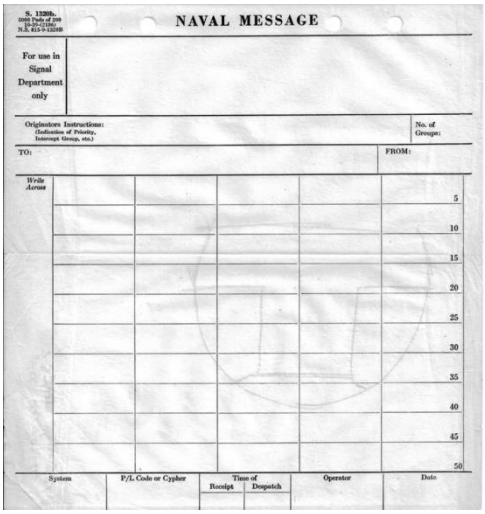
Duties of a Telegraphist

A telegraphist (British English), telegrapher (American English), or telegraph operator uses a telegraph key to send and receive the Morse code in order to communicate by land lines or radio.

Telegraphist was one of the first "high-technology" professions of the modern era. Many young men and young women left their farms and fishing communities in the late 19th century to take high-paying jobs as professional telegraph operators. In those early days telegraphers were in such demand that operators could move from place to place and job to job to achieve ever-higher salaries, thereby freeing them from subsistence lives on family farms.

During the Great War the Royal Navy enlisted many volunteers as radio telegraphists. Telegraphists were indispensable at sea in the early days of wireless telegraphy, and many young men were called to sea as professional radiotelegraph operators who were always accorded high-paying officer status at sea. Subsequent to the Titanic disaster and the Radio Act of 1912, the International Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) conventions established the 500kHz maritime distress frequency monitoring and mandated that all passenger-carrying ships carry licensed radio telegraph operators.

High-paying jobs as seagoing ship's radiotelegraphy officers were still common until the late 20th century. In the 21st century, the employment of professional radio telegraphers was largely discontinued in maritime service and replaced by the use of satellite communications services.


NAVAL MESSAGE

For use in Signal Department only

Originators Instructions: (Indication of Priority, Intercept Group, etc.)

No. of Groups:

TO:

FROM:

Prefix / Words / Across

5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50

System | P/L Code or Cypher | Time of Receipt | Time of Despatch | Operator | Date

The typewriter only came into use at the end of the war, so all messages were recorded by hand. Telegraphists copied messages on forms such as these. This one is believed to be the October 1939 version which would have been used during WWII.

On the next page is the main book that we studied along with a section of the index

In early 1944, [likely late February] *I was posted at HMCS Stadacona (Stacks), Halifax, awaiting draft to a ship. I was now 18 and had never been within 1000 miles of an ocean.*

HMCS Stadacona

HMCS Stadacona


Overhead view of HMCS Stadacona base

HMCS Stadacona was originally built as the British Army's Wellington Barracks, later known as the Nelson Barracks, as part of the Halifax Defence Complex. After the departure of British military forces from Canada in 1906, the facilities were transferred to the Department of Marine and Fisheries. The RCN appropriated the site when established in 1910 and it was named HMCS Stadacona and commissioned on 1 July 1923. The Stadacona Barracks, frequently referred to as "Stad", is an adjunct to HMC Dockyard located west of the waterfront in the north end of the Halifax peninsula.

I was not at HMCS Stadacona long before my first call for duty was to report to HMCS Arrowhead to pick up survivors from a ship that had been torpedoed outside Halifax harbour. But due to the rush of this corvette to rescue them, I missed boarding that vessel. The Atlantic Ocean is a big place for U-boats to find targets, so known departure points like just outside Halifax harbour, were the most dangerous places during the war. The St. Lawrence River east of Quebec City was also very dangerous.

HMCS Arrowhead

Originally commissioned by the Royal Navy but built in Sorel Quebec, HMCS Arrowhead first served in Escort Group 4 in Iceland Command. She was one of ten ships loaned to the RCN and in June 1941 she was escorting convoys from St. John's to Iceland. In late December, Arrowhead was sent to Charleston for a refit. She returned to Halifax in February 1942 and did one more cross-Atlantic convoy before being reassigned to Western Local Escort Force (WLEF). In July she joined the Gulf Escort Force and participated in the Battle of the St. Lawrence.

The Battle of the St. Lawrence involved marine and anti-submarine actions throughout the lower St. Lawrence River and the entire Gulf of Saint Lawrence, Strait of Belle Isle, Anticosti Island and Cabot Strait from May–October 1942, September 1943, and again in October–November 1944. During this time, German U-boats sank many merchant ships and four Canadian warships requiring Canada to discontinue all shipping.. There were also several near shore actions involving the drop of German spies, or the attempted pick up of escaping prisoners of war. Despite the 23 ships lost, this battle marked a strategic victory for Canadian forces who ultimately managed to disrupt U-boat activity, protect Canadian and Allied convoys, and intercept all attempted shore operations. This difficult period was the first time that a foreign power had inflicted casualties in Canadian inland waters since the US incursions in the War of 1812.

Arrowhead spent the final months of 1942 bouncing around commands, joining Halifax Force in October, and returning to WLEF at the end of November. She stayed with WLEF until August 1944. .

In May 1944, Arrowhead had her second major refit in Baltimore where her fo'c'sle was extended. After returning to service she was assigned to Quebec-Labrador convoys in September 1944. In December of that year, Arrowhead was reassigned to Western Escort Force's Escort Group W-8 and used on the "Triangle Run" between Boston/New York, Halifax and St. John's until May 1945.

*My next order came during my 1st week in Halifax. "**Telegraphist J.A. Armstrong Report Immediately aboard HMCS Wetaskiwin, K175 at Pier 9, Naval Dockyards – Report Immediately**" Typical "Wait", "Wait" - then "Rush", "Rush". I grabbed my duffle bag, which I always kept packed and my hammock and hurried to the dockyards. And there she was K175 – beautiful with her new extended fo'c's'le.*

HMCS Wetaskiwin K175
Note her main mast is still forward of the bridge.

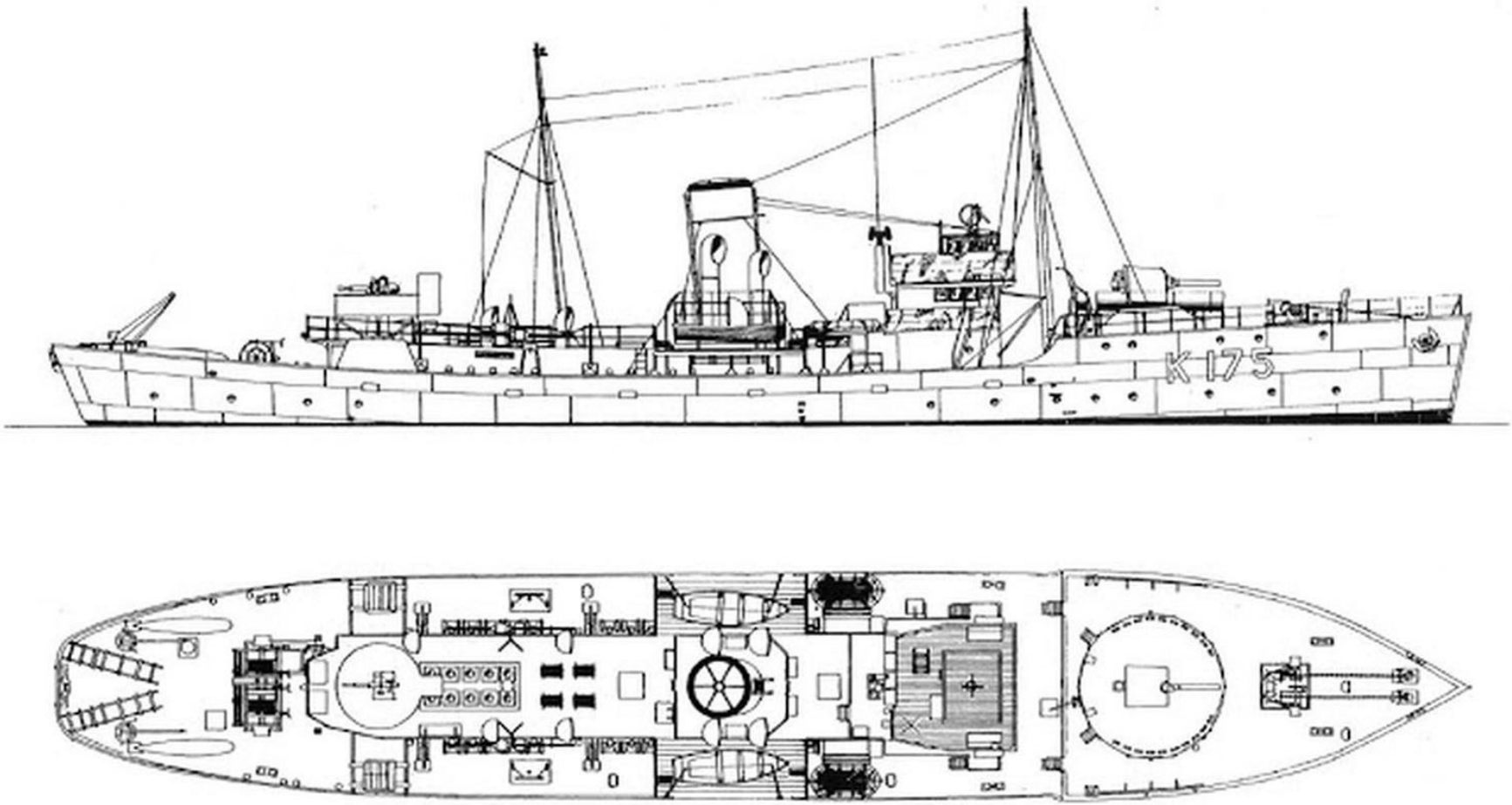
HMCS Wetaskiwin well ocean beaten but with the changes to mast and forcastle that Jack would have seen when he boarded her.

HMCS Wetaskiwin

Laid down as HMCS Banff, she was renamed HMCS Wetaskiwin during construction. Commissioned at Esquimalt on 17 Dec 1940 as HMCS Wetaskiwin K175, she was the first west coast-built corvette to enter service.

Displacement: 965.2 tonnes - Dimensions: 62.5 m x 10.1 m x 3.5 m, Speed: 16 knots - Crew: 85
Armament: one 4-inch (102-mm) gun, one 2-pound (0.9 kg) gun, two 20-mm guns (2 x I), one Hedgehog mortar and depth charges
Battle honours - Atlantic 1941-1945.
Oil fuelled, she patrolled out of Esquimalt until 17 Mar 1941 when HMCS Alberni, HMCS Agassiz and HMCS Wetaskiwin departed Esquimalt for Halifax. En-route they stopped at San Pedro, California for fuel, where a party for the crew, hosted by actress Mary Pickford and her husband Douglas Fairbanks, was held for them. They arrived at Halifax on 13 Apr 1941.

War duty Prior to Jack's Arrival
On 23 May 1941, Alberni, Agassiz and Wetaskiwin left Halifax for St. John's to join the recently formed NEF (Newfoundland Escort Force). In Jun 1941 she escorted her first convoy, HX.130, to Iceland, and during the next eight months made six round trips there with eastbound convoys. During this assignment, Wetaskiwin participated in the battles for convoy SC 42 in September 1941 and convoy SC 48 in October 1941.She remained with this unit until she returned to Halifax on 24 Jan 1942, and in Feb 1942 commenced a major refit at Liverpool, N.S. After working up Wetaskiwin was assigned to MOEF escort group A-3 for the battle of Convoy HX 233. When group A3 disbanded, in May 1942 she joined EG (Escort Group) C-3, arriving in Londonderry on 05 Jun 1942 for the first time from convoy HX.191.. On 31 July 1942, while escorting ON.115, she shared with Skeena the sinking of U-588. In mid-Jan 1943 she arrived at Liverpool, N.S., for refit, which was completed on 09 Mar 1943 and followed by further repairs at Halifax. In May 1943, she joined EG C-5, and that **Dec 1943 went to Galveston, Texas, for a long refit, including extension of her fo'c's'le. Following its completion on 06 Mar 1944, she returned briefly to Halifax where Jack Armstrong joined her crew. Next page schematic plans prior to modifications & drawing after modifications.**


K 175


K 58

I climbed the gangway and reported to the Officer of the Deck. He gave me directions and pointed me toward the Communications Mess. The Communications Mess was located on the lower deck – just forward of Midship and the Wardroom – below the Seaman's Mess and aft of the Stoker's Mess . I looked around and thought,"There's my new home until the war ends..- or until.....whatever." It was about 20 ft by 20 ft. There was a long table with long boards for seats on each side bolted to the deck. There was a row of footlockers about two feet wide, 18 inches high along the deck against the starboard bulkhead. I slept on these lockers for a couple months because all the space to hang hammocks was taken. [Hammocks were better than bunks where you could roll too much.]

I shared this mess with 10 other communication crew – Telegraphists, (radio operators), Signal and Coders. Plus we had an almost constant guest. A large (about 6ft, 2 inch and 250 lbs) good natured seaman from the Seaman's Mess above. He seemed to like us better than his mess-mates and hadalmost all of his meals with us. He was sort of like our mascot. He was known by everyone as "DogMeat".

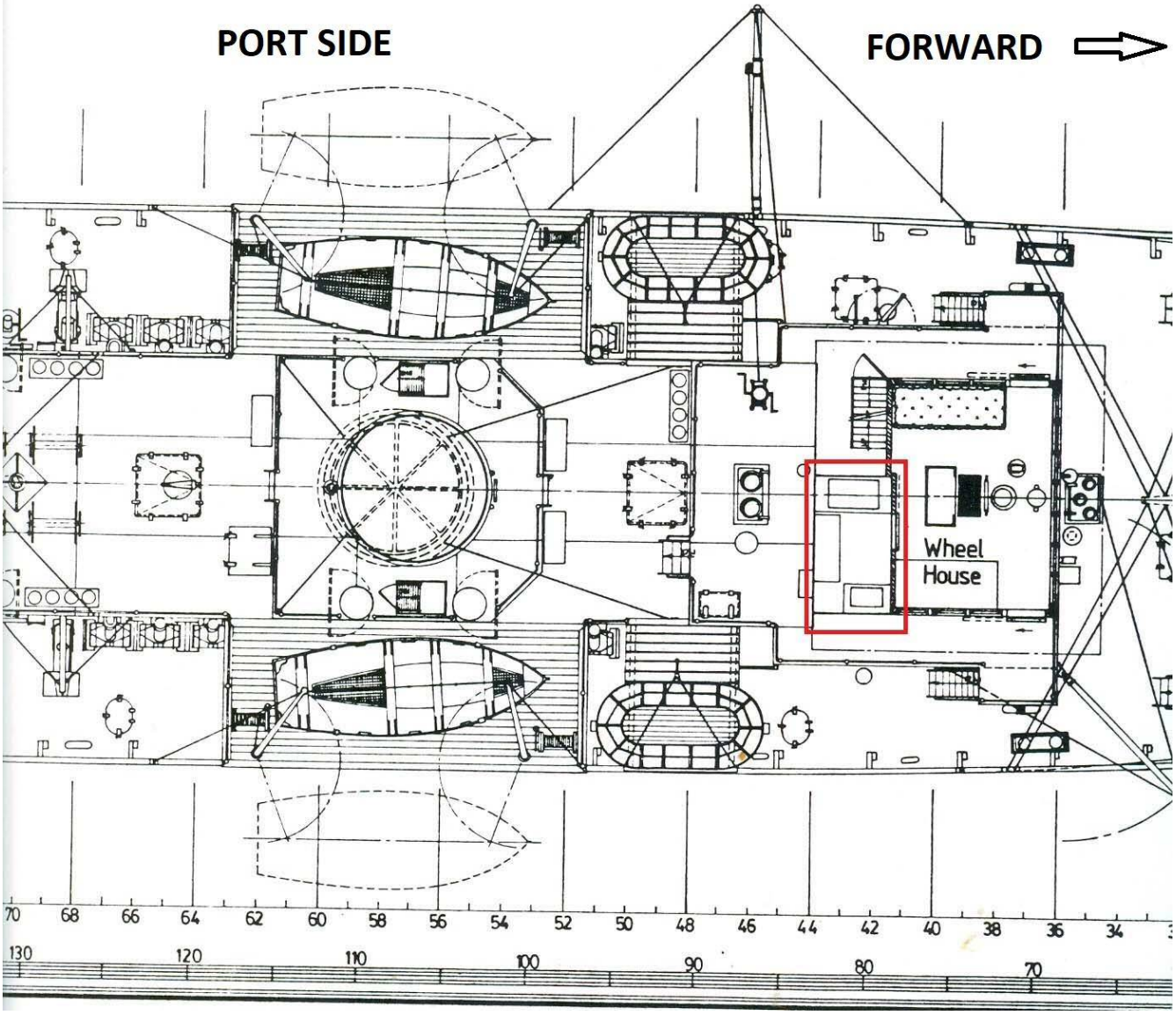
I had come on board about 4:00 pm, my Killick told me I was on watch at 20:00 twenty hundred – (8:00 pm) He took me to the Radio Shack and gave me an introduction. The Radio Shack was located at the top of the Super Structure, just aft, and accessed through, the Wheel House. It was reached by climbing an outside metal stairway on the right side, going up, it was attached to the wall of the Super Structure. On the left side of the stairs, it looked straight down, over the ship's rail – into the ocean.

Radio Room Restored to WWII in HMCS Sackville at Halifax. The corner lamp is an obvious error.

The Radio Shack was not large, perhaps 10 or 12 ft. by 8 ft. There were two radio cabinets – a VHF and a UHF, there was a 3 ft wide shelf running the length of the back wall. On the shelf were a commercial radio – always tuned to Voice of America – various items of test equipment, portable radios for emergencies, message pads & pencils and a telegraph key. There was one swivel chair for

the Operator – usually called "the Tel" or "Sparks". In the right corner of the room was a chair for the the Coder. My Coder was a guy named Whitt. He was from Cornwall, Ont., a great guy and my partner for my total time aboard. On the back board were cards showing the Call Signs of the Fleet Command in Halifax, the Senior Office (SO), Escort, the Convoy Commander and the International Distress Frequencies.

As 20:00 hours approached, I made my way to the Radio Room for my 1st Duty Watch. I remember being mildly surprised that total responsibility would be entrusted to a greenhorn who had been aboard for about four hours. But I was confident and all went well except I was becoming horribly seasick.



Midnight came and I was relieved by Sinbad (another Tel) and went out through the Wheelhouse. It was totally black, the ship was rolling badly and that metal stairway was wet with spray. I could only see; faintly the white tips of our bow wave far below. I knew that if I tried to go down that wet, rolling stairway I was going to go overboard for a last swim

I hung about in the Wheelhouse pretending I wasn't ready for bed yet, while really working up the courage to tackle that malevolent wet, iron stairway in total darkness.

After a short time a seaman arrived bringing a mug of hot chocolate for the Helmsman. When he left to go below, I followed closely, holding his shirt tail. I arrived safely in our mess and lay on the hard lockers, terribly seasick. I was ghastly sick!

For the next five days and five nights a bucket was my constant companion. I was so sick that sometimes I was afraid I would die. Sometimes I was afraid I wouldn't. There was one medical person on board, the crew medical nurse, our Tiffy. He saw me sick and I asked him if he had any medication that could help me. He said "No, just die !" I grabbed him and said: " Some day when I feel better, I will throw you overboard ! " For the rest of my time at sea, he managed to avoid me....
In all that time, I never missed one minute of my duty watch time. The PA system would announce " Eight bells – Armstrong and his bucket on watch. "

After five days at sea we arrived at "NewfyJohn", the name the sailors always used for St. John's Newfoundland. St John's is a lovely harbour which is entered in a gap between high rock cliffs on each side. This gap is not visible from the sea, just a wall of rock until turned into.

St. John's Harbour showing the entrance

St. John's Harbour 1941

At this time Newfoundland was not part of Canada. . Newfoundland fell badly into debt during the 1930's depression and gave up self government and elections to become dependent on Great Britain and was governed by a Commission of Government. When Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, Newfoundland was automatically at war as well. Newfoundland was the first point of North American attack by Germany and conversely the first line of defence, but was unable to defend itself. The Commission of Government decided, with Britain pre-occupied surviving, to turn over its air and naval defence to Canada. Canada established an air force presence at Newfoundland airport, built a massive airbase in Goosebay, Labrador and Tobay (now St. John's Airport). Canada also built a large naval base in St. John's. The US however spent even more money. In return for 50 used destroyers from the U.S. Great Britain granted still neutral US substantial naval, military and air bases in Newfoundland for 99 years. “free and without consideration” in effect they became part of the US. Although the expected German invasion never came, St John's found itself occupied by both Allied Canadian and American forces.

During the course of the Second World War, St. John's evolved from being merely a defended harbour and developed by the Royal Canadian Navy into a strategically critical escort base in the North Atlantic. It was second only to Halifax, which had a long history as an established naval base.

By establishing a forward base at St. John's, as the British had done in Iceland, the RCN could extend coverage more than 900 kilometres further into the Atlantic. As a result, the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF) was formed on May 27, 1941. It was comprised of six RCN destroyers and 17 corvettes, alongside seven RN destroyers and four corvettes.

Convoys now assembled at Bedford Basin, in Halifax, where the Western Local Escort Force (WLEF) took them to the Western Ocean Meeting Point (WOMP), just east of the Grand Banks. The NEF then escorted the convoys through “The Pit” to the Mid-Ocean Meeting Point (MOMP) off Iceland. Here, the ships were met by the RN, and the NEF would leave to re-fuel in Iceland, pick up a westbound convoy from Britain, and proceed to the WOMP. From there, the WLEF would take the convoy to Halifax for dispersal. The NEF ships would then proceed to St. John's for rest.

Convoy assembling in Bedford Basin, Halifax

As a bit of historical context, in 1940 neutral Iceland was technically invaded by the United Kingdom to thwart any attempts by Hitler to invade Iceland first and possibly use it as a staging point for a potential invasion against Great Britain. .On 18 May 1940, Britain requested Canada to garrison and defend Iceland with the 2nd Canadian Division, along with air force, anti-air, shore battery and coastal defence elements. "Z" Force, and The Royal Regiment of Canada , landed at Reykjavik on 16 June 1940. The remainder of the 2,659 man "Z" Force, comprising Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, The Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa , a brigade signal section and details, arrived on 9 July. Canadian forces dispersed across the island and initiated work on defence positions, and preparations for the building of the aerodrome in Kaldaðarnes, building roads, improving harbours, establishing guard over strategic assets, and setting up coast watch stations. On 9 February 1941, Canadian forces engaged a single German aircraft overflying the island.

On 7 July 1941, when the defence of Iceland was transferred from Britain to the (still officially neutral) United States, by agreement with Iceland. Canadian army, navy and air force units were dispatched to and continued to operate in and around Iceland throughout the war. No. 162 Squadron RCAF was seconded to RAF Coastal Command and stationed at RAF Reykjavik from January 1944 to cover the mid-ocean portion of the North Atlantic shipping route. Aircraft from this squadron attacked two U-boats in 1944, sinking U-342 on 17 April 1944. After the war British and Canadian forces left but despite an agreement to leave in 6 months, a substantial US military presence remained in Iceland until 30 September 2006.

As we neared our dock at St. John's, the first thing I noticed was a small boy about eight years old waiting for us on the jetty. It turned out his name was Joey and he would meet incoming ships and take orders for his father's homemade Screech. I bought a small bottle of his Screech and brought it home when war was over. Below is that same bottle along with another bootleg bottle..

Joey with Bernie Forbes (who painted the Wet Ass Queen)

Screech in a commercial Screech bottle

Screech in a Gin bottle

We stayed for a day or two in port and I completely recovered. I was never seasick again although living in a round bottom corvette in rotten weather is indescribable, and the north Atlantic is a very cruel sea.

The trip to Newfoundland was part of the ship's work-ups after the Galveston refit before proceeding to Bermuda for further work-ups late in Apr 1944. Returning northward, she re-joined C-5, leaving Londonderry on 23 Sep 1944 for the last time to join EG W-7, WLEF (Western Local Escort Force), for the remainder of the war. WLEF referred to the organization of anti-submarine escorts for World War II trade convoys from North American port cities to the Western Ocean Meeting Point (WOMP or WESTOMP) near Newfoundland where ships of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) assumed responsibility for safely delivering the convoys to the British Isles.)

The Flower class corvettes were nicknamed "the pekingese of the ocean". They had a reputation of having poor sea-handling characteristics, most often rolling in heavy seas, with 80-degree rolls, 40 degrees each side of upright, being fairly common. Many crewmen suffered severe motion sickness for

a few weeks until they acclimatized to shipboard life. Although poor in their sea-handling characteristics, the Flowers were extremely seaworthy; no Allied sailor was ever lost overboard from a Flower during World War II, outside combat.

Naval planners originally intended the Flower-class to operate as escorts for coastal convoys, but as circumstances changed the Flower-class became essential for North Atlantic convoys. These corvettes, which as Nicholas Monsarrat (a corvette officer) wrote "would roll on wet grass" were not designed for deep ocean work, but that became their primary role in the North Atlantic and elsewhere as Britain desperately sought escorts for her merchant shipping.

Cyril Stephens, a seaman aboard the corvette HMS Orchis recalls:
"Sick….yes, that was the first baptism of a corvette…It was like a corkscrew. About the third dip and you'd get tons and tons of water come over the fo'c's'le [forecastle]… you had wet clothes on steam pipes trying to dry, you had water floating around all over the place, people being sick…it was awful."

So the main disadvantage of the corvettes was that they had been designed for the short, steep, seas of the tidal North Sea; in the open Atlantic they rolled and pitched badly. Later modifications helped, such as extending the forecastle, but their 200-foot hull was simply not long enough for ocean work.
While the Flower-class became notorious for their handling in deep-ocean convoy, they also became well-liked by their crews for their sea-keeping: the little ships would roll, and bob and pitch and heave, but they wouldn't succumb to the weather.

Lieutenant Harold G Chesterman, Captain of the corvette HMS Snowflake, remembered:
"…for the first six weeks you know you haven't a hope in hell of getting over that next wave, and then maybe, after the next six weeks, you think, well maybe we will, and then after that you know nothing the Atlantic can throw at you will hurt you…We told him [Mr William Reed, the 'Flower' designer] how good they were. Uncomfortable and lively and wet, but safe…"

Bernie Forbes of Smiths Falls, Ont., enlisted at 18. His first real experience with corvettes came in December 1941 while serving in the destroyer Saguenay westbound from Iceland. "It was one of the wildest seas I ever experienced, enough to disperse the convoy. The lower decks had two feet of water sloshing around our feet. We in the destroyer were concerned our little corvettes would never make port. To our amazement, when we arrived in St. John's harbour, all the corvettes were neatly tied up alongside the jetty, and had been berthed there for three days." Bernie Forbes would later serve on the Wetaskiwin.

Recalled Kincardine stoker Barnes. "The corvette bounced around like a cork. The waves were so high you couldn't see the top when you were in the trough. The corvette would climb that wave, then, passing the top, the stem of the ship would come crashing down on the other side. This would send shivers through the whole ship. You could feel it through your boots. Destroyer travel basically is a straight line. They go through the wave, not ride it."

"There was nothing like the roll and pitch in a heavy sea to give you the sensation of weightlessness—lifting you up and then dropping out, leaving you floating," said Doug May, a telegraphist in Kincardine and now a 64-year member of Chilliwack, B.C., Branch.

Stoker William Anderson of Niagara Falls, Ont., who served in Collingwood and Orangeville, summed up his experience. "Corvettes were the best sea ships anywhere. It was said they would roll on wet grass, but they would sail in any weather!"

But after recovering from sea sickness and fear of capsizing, life aboard these corvettes was not easy. The Flower class represented fully half of all Allied convoy escort vessels in the North Atlantic during World War II. Service on these corvettes in the North Atlantic was typically cold, wet, monotonous and uncomfortable. Every dip of the forecastle into an oncoming wave was followed by a cascade of water into the well deck amidships. Men at action stations were drenched with spray, and water entered living spaces through hatches opened to access ammunition magazines. Interior decks were constantly wet and condensation dripped from the overheads. The head (or sanitary toilet) was drained by a straight pipe to the ocean; and a reverse flow of the icy North Atlantic would cleanse the backside of those using it during rough weather. "There was discomfort in using the heads (toilets) at sea," recalled Forbes. "While the ship rolled, one was likely to be flushed by a backlash of water which the toilet traps could not stop. Perhaps this is where my corvette Wetaskiwin got her nickname—the Wet Ass Queen."

Trask noted the short length and shallow draft made corvettes uncomfortable to live in even after they were modified. "A fortnight of rolling and pitching on North Atlantic convoy duty tended to exhaust all who sailed in them. Sleeping conditions for seamen were crowded, stuffy and quite often water-laden. The seamen's messdeck was also full of smoke as most everyone in the mess was a smoker, so the only fresh air we got was when we were on watch in the open air."

Barnes is direct: "On a corvette three days at sea, anything that was breakable was broken. Riding in a corvette, working, recreation time, sleeping, etc., was extremely rough, noisy and dirty. The smell of the ship, and the men themselves, was absolutely gross. No laundry facility or showers. Fresh water was very limited. Hammocks were lashed (tied up) and stored during the day. Then at night hammocks were opened and I swear you could see blue haze rise from them. Stokers slept in their clothes, they merely removed their boots."

Ernie Pain, 87, of Cornwall, Ont., who served in HMCS Louisburg agreed;: "Living on a corvette is not like a cruise ship. Hammocks are slung all over the seamen's messdeck. Blankets are hanging out. Feet and legs hanging over the messdeck table you eat off. Washing at sea was next to impossible as we made salt water into drinkable water, which was turned on back in the heads for a half-hour a day. Amazing that we never had too much sickness other than crabs and scabies, common in the navy."

Hammocks were, in fact, popular. "Sleeping in a mick is the only way to go on a small ship," explained Art Chinery who served in Orangeville. "Like being in a cocoon."

Food could be a challenge. Howard Trusdale of St. Thomas, Ont., said: "The cooks had a tough job working in close quarters on a less than stable platform with pots and pans that wouldn't always stay in one place and crew who couldn't all be pleased at the same time."

"I didn't think our food was a problem, except when a pretty good stew was ruined with too much curry. Maybe the cook was trying to cover up something," observed May, who enlisted at age 18. "Bread was something else, especially the Irish bread. It was heavy and very moist. Two days out and it was really mouldy. However, some extra jam covered the mould spots and down it went. I understand that penicillin was derived from mould, so maybe that is why I'm as healthy as I am today!"

Vic Martin of Sarnia, Ont., a Regina leading seaman, is concise: "The cooks did a good job, especially considering the conditions they had to work with."

By 1941 corvettes carried twice as many crewmen as anticipated in the original design. As Jack

discovered, men slept on lockers, as he had to, or tabletops or in any dark place that offered a little warmth. The inability to store perishable food meant a reliance on preserved food such as corned-beef and powdered potato for all meals. (Source: Legion Magazine, "Scrappy Little Corvettes",January 5, 2010 by Mac Johnston)

Jack Armstrong agreed. *"Where did you find these quotes, they exactly describes conditions which were almost indescribable aboard HMCS Wetaskiwin !" He remembers that a regular meal was canned "Red Lead", a canned mixture of tomatoes and bacon, which appears to have been a regular staple of sailors.*

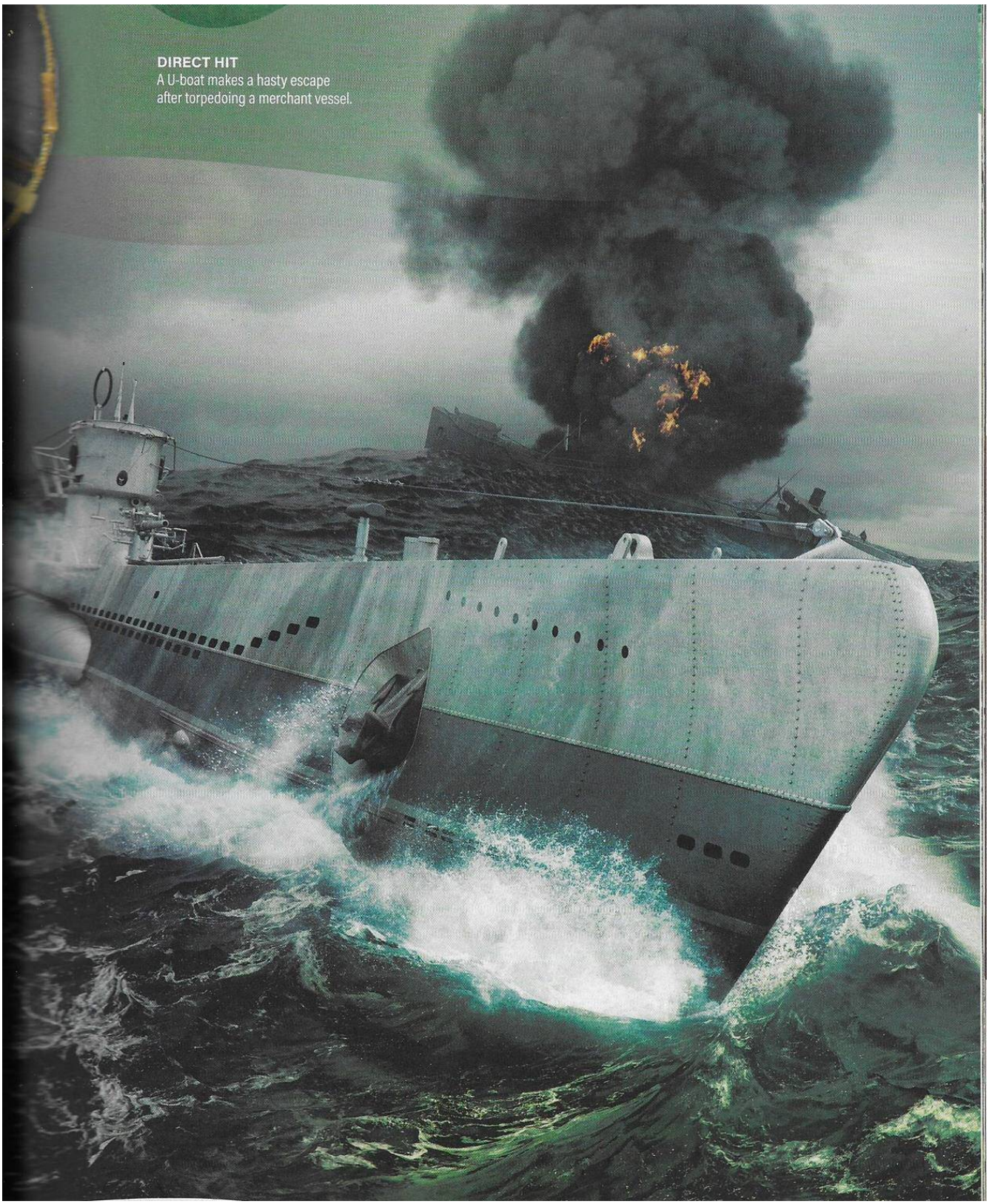
Early in the war merchant ships crossed the Atlantic singularly or in pairs. They were heavily loaded, low in the water and unarmed, easy prey for U-boats and many were lost with a heavy loss of life. Later things improved greatly with the implementation of the convoy system. The convoys consisted usually of about 60 to 150 ships – freighters, container ships, grain carriers and tankers, heavily loaded with food and other supplies for Britain such as troops, guns, ammunition, tanks, & aircraft. They were the lifeline that enabled the Allies to survive and eventually win the war. The Germans were well aware of their critical value and threw everything at them.

The convoys were protected by a screen of about 6 warships, all Canadian, corvettes, frigates, and a few destroyers. The convoys sailed from Halifax and New York to Londonderry in Northern Ireland. They were formed in rows and column packed as tightly as safety would permit but still covering a huge area without ships protecting them in front, rear and both sides. The most dangerous (oil, explosives, etc.) and valuable (troops, military equipment, etc.) merchant ships were placed in the centre. We travelled in a zig-zag track to make it harder for U-boats to track us.

Imagine trying to co-ordinate the speed and zig-zag turns of 150 ships in a tight pack in radio silence and blackout conditions at night, often in wild stormy weather. In comparison, herding cattle would be child's play. Mostly we were successful but sometimes a corvette would have to round up strays. These were very dangerous times because it broke up our defensive pattern and left part of the convoy exposed to attack.

Keeping track of a convoy of ships while watching the depths for U-boats was challenging

And attack they did. The call to battle stations occurred quite frequently and the fight was on and it was a violent, no holds barred, winner take all affair. loser, lost all.



Artist Piotr Forkasiewicz depicts a U-boat making a hasty escape after torpedoing a merchant vessel.
(Source: Legion – Canada's Ultimate Story, Special Edition "Battle of the St. Lawrence", cover & p. 31, vol.6, #3, 2022)

The U-boat was an awesome weapon – built and equipped with top notch German technology and a highly skilled , well trained crew.

But the corvette was a near-perfect anti-U boat weapon. She was not large by warship standards but she was very manoeuvrable and was loaded with very powerful weapons, and very efficient electronics for detecting and tracking submarines.

A captured U-boat 1944

Corvette Armament

The original Flower class were fitted with a 4-inch (102 mm) Mk. IX breech-loading gun of WW I vintage on the forecastle or fo'c'sle gun on the bow. Designed as part of the anti-torpedo boat armament of British battleships, the gun fired a 31-pound shell a maximum of 12,000 yards. Its accuracy from a small, bobbing vessel was poor, except at point-blank range.

In addition it was equipped with a 2-pounder (40 mm) pom-pom gun on a "bandstand" over the engine room. Due to initial shortages, a pair of Lewis guns was sometimes substituted for the pom-pom, which would have left the ship very vulnerable to aircraft attack in its envisaged role of coastal convoy escort and patrol in the North Sea. (Wetaskiwin had both Lewis guns and Pom-poms.)

Weapons of HMCS Wetaskiwin

Four inch main gun


Twin Oerlikon anti aircraft guns


Sailors by a Depth Charge which was piston ejected

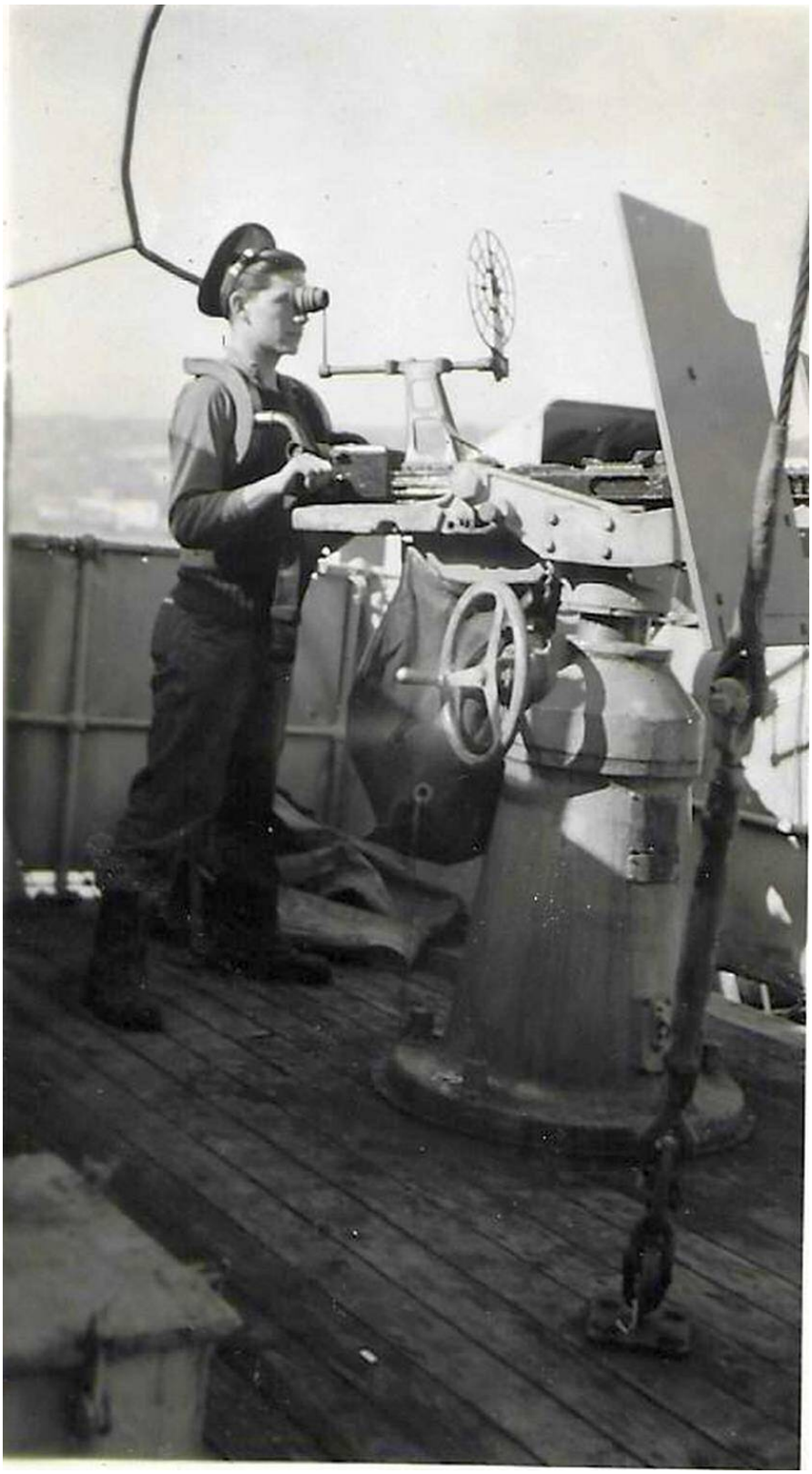

Hedgehog Water Grenades located on the upper deck


Sailor on 2 lb Machine gun

A good shot of a Pom-Pom gun on HMCS Sackville. The HMCS had two of these, one on the port side and one on starboard.

Depth Charges ready to roll off stern of HMCS Sackville

HMCS Sackville, very similar to the HMCS Wetaskiwin, was initially part of the same escort group as the Wetaskiwin and is wholly preserved and restored to its wartime configuration in Halifax harbour.



Sailor aiming Oerlikon anti aircraft gun. Jack pointed out that the photos that show sailors wearing uniforms are all posed photos because they never wore uniforms during day to day duties.

Corvettes were originally fitted with two Mk. II depth-charge throwers (basically mortars), one on either side on the engine room casing, two rails at the stern and a couple of dozen charges. Wartime experience soon led to the addition of another thrower per side and an armament of 100 depth charges each filled with 300 pounds of explosives. Initially the material was TNT, but by mid-war much more powerful Torpex or Minol was used. The canister would sink through the water, and its explosive charge would be detonated at a pre-selected depth by means of a hydrostatic valve. One thrower on each side and one of the rails aft handled specially weighted 'heavy' charges that were designed to sink faster. By mixing the weight of the charges and the order of their firing, an attacking ship could create a three-dimensional explosion around the submarine and hope to crush its hull with the shock wave.

Unfortunately Canadian Flower Class corvettes were fitted with a magnetic compass rather than a gyrocompass, which was prone to error if the magnetism of the ship was altered unwittingly—from the pounding of the ship at sea, guns firing or depth charges exploding. The magnetic compass also meant that the early Canadian corvettes had to fit the most rudimentary of asdic (Sonar), the British type 123A. This combination of a primitive asdic and a magnetic compass meant most Canadian depth-charge attacks were educated guesswork. As one senior British officer commented in 1943, "The problems of a corvette captain when attempting an accurate attack with a swinging magnetic compass are well nigh insoluble."

Depth Charges resting against depth charge throwers on HMCS Sackville, the only surviving Flower Class corvette

A major difference between the RN vessels and the RCN, USN, and other navies' vessels was the provision of upgraded ASDIC and radar. Asdic is now known as sonar. The RN was a world leader in developing these technologies, and thus RN Flowers were somewhat better-equipped for remote detection of enemy submarines. A good example of this is the difficulty that RCN Flowers had in intercepting U-boats with their Canadian-designed SW1C metric radar, while the RN vessels were equipped with the technologically advanced Type 271 centimetric sets. In addition, RCN vessels were incapable of operating gyrocompasses, making ASDIC attacks more difficult. Underwater detection

capability was provided by a fixed ASDIC dome; this was later modified to be retractable. Subsequent inventions such as the High Frequency Radio Detection Finder (Huff-Duff) were later added, along with various radar systems (such as the Type 271), which proved particularly effective in low-visibility conditions in the North Atlantic.

The Flower class had been designed for inshore patrol and harbour anti-submarine defence; therefore, many required minor modifications when the Allied navies began deploying these vessels as trans-Atlantic convoy escorts. These small warships could be supported by any small dockyard or naval station, so many ships came to have a variety of different weapons systems and design modifications depending upon when and where they were refitted. As Jack Armstrong stated "There *is really no such thing as a standard Flower-class corvette"*, Several of the major changes that vessels in the class underwent are indicated below, in a typical chronological order:

- The original Flowers had a mast located immediately forward of the bridge, a notable exception to naval practice at that time. .Original twin mast configuration changed to single mast in front of the bridge, then moved behind the bridge for improved visibility.
- Heavy mine-sweeping gear removed for deep-sea escort work and to improve range.
- Galley relocated from the stern to midships.
- Extra depth charge storage racks were fitted at the stern. Later, more depth charges stowed along walkways.
- Hedgehog fitted to enable remote attacks while keeping ASDIC contact.
- Surface radar fitted in a "lantern" housing on the bridge.
- The modified Flowers. during the mid and latter years of the war,. which included the HMCS Wetaskiwin, saw the forecastle extended aft past the bridge to the aft end of the funnel, a variation known as the "long forecastle" design. Apart from providing a very useful space where the whole crew could gather out of the weather, the added weight improved the ships' stability and speed..
- Several vessels were given a "three-quarters length" extension.
- Increased flare at the bow. This and the above modification created the modified Flower design for subsequent orders.
- Various changes to the bridge, typically lowering and lengthening it. Enclosed compass house removed.
- Extra twin Lewis guns mounted on the bridge or engine room roof.
- Oerlikon 20 mm cannons fitted, usually two on the bridge wings but sometimes as many as six spread out along the engine-room roof, depending on the theatre of operations.

Any particular ship could have any mix of these, or other specialist one-off modifications. Ships allocated to other navies such as the RCN or USN usually had different armament and deck layouts.

Her most valuable quality however was her turning circle, the tightest of all Allied warships, and most importantly, tighter than any submerged U-boat. As James Lamb points out," In any submarine confrontation, the corvette was the manoeuvring master."

Flower Class Corvettes

The British called their corvettes after flowers to mock the Germans that their wolf class U-boat had been sunk by a Tulip or a Pansy, so these corvettes were called Flower Class. The Canadian corvettes were essentially the same design as the British and some were built for the British Navy. However

instead of naming Canadian corvettes after flowers, the Canadian Naval Staff wisely decided to name them after Canadian communities to help establish a bond between the Navy and local communities across Canada. In fact, the RCN briefly flirted with labelling its corvettes “Town-class,” but was forced to abandon the idea when the RN adopted that title for the old destroyers acquired from the United States Navy in 1940. So RCN corvettes remained “Flower-class”, but—except for a small number acquired from the British—they carried the names of Canadian communities.

It is a measure of the modest conception for the corvettes held by the RCN that the names chosen for the first 54 came from small-town Canada, places like Sackville, N.B., Napanee, Ont., Brandon, Man., and Trail, B.C. Some towns and villages on the initial list had to be abandoned to avoid confusion with other warships in the British Commonwealth, so the corvette destined to honour Churchill, Man., became Moose Jaw, and Jasper was renamed Kamloops. It was only in the second building program of 1940-41, as the role of the corvette increased in importance, that larger communities, like Halifax and Vancouver joined the list. And this approach worked with such communities staying in touch and often sending giifts to the crews operating their town named corvette.

A friend and veteran, Tom Farley, painted this of the HMCS Wetaskiwin for Jack in 2004.

CREW COMPLEMENT

The corvette, in its original design, was a very simple ship intended for very simple tasks of comparatively short duration. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in early plans for crew size and accommodation. The original complement was twenty-nine all ranks, but the earliest evidence of crew size for Canadian corvettes suggested a total of four officers and forty-eight ratings, as follows:

1 Lieutenant Commander, as Captain
1 Lieutenant, RCN(R)
2 Lieutenants, or Sub Lieutenants, RCN(VR)
1 Chief Petty Officer
3 Leading Seamen
12 Able or Ordinary Seamen
1 Leading Telegraphist
1 Telegraphist
1 Telegraphist Signalman
1 Signalman
1 Engineer Officer, or Chief Engine Room Artificer
3 ERAs
3 Stoker POs
6 Leading Stokers
10 Stokers
1 UPO or LVA
2 Cooks
2 Stewards

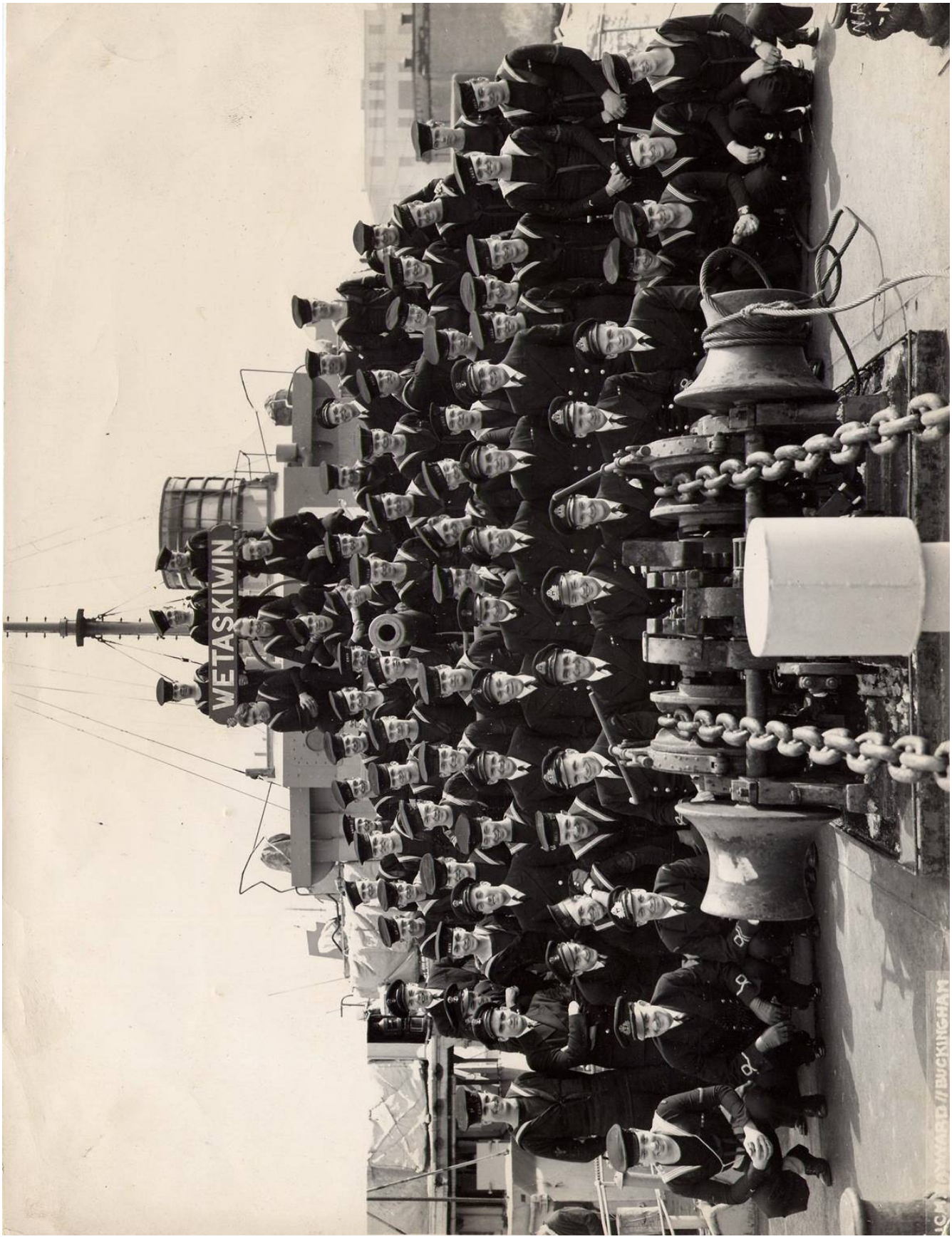
Among these crewmen were the following weapons and sensor specialists (non-substantive ratings):
1 Telegraphist Coder
1 Leading Coder
2 Quarters Ratings (Gunnery Specialists)
1 Leading Torpedoman (in charge of Depth Charges and Electronics)
2 Seamen Torpedomen
3 High Signals Detection Ratings (Sonar operators)
3 Signals Detection Operators

As the size of the crew and the complexity of the weapons and sensors increased, the number of specialists and support personnel grew as well. By1941 radar, anti-aircraft and more signal ratings had been added, as had an additional officer. The HMCS Wetaskiwin in 1944 had a crew of 85, so accommodation must have been very tight !!

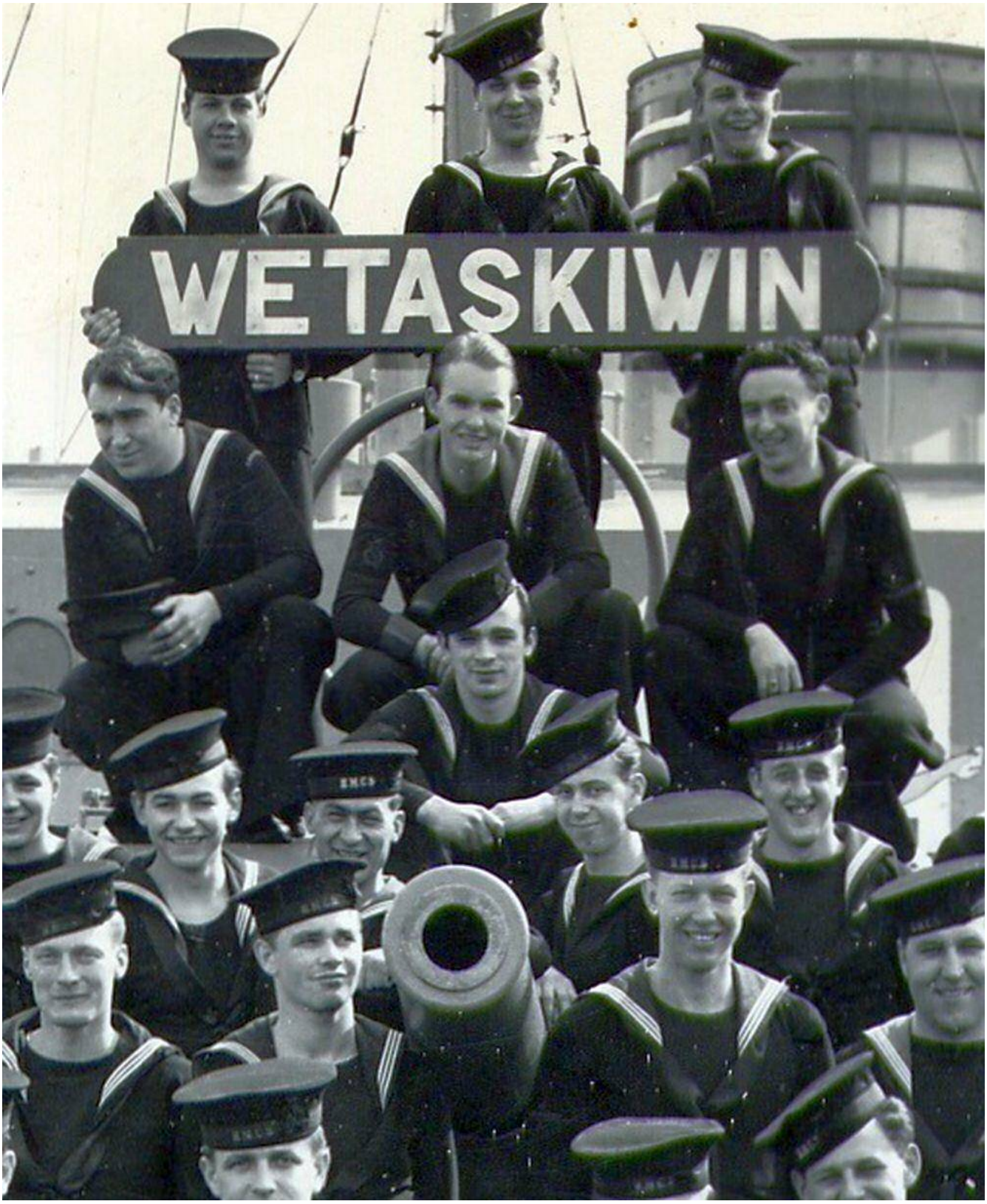
An incredible observation was that virtually all of the crew and officers were reservists who had never worked in the navy, most had never been to sea prior to their posting in the HMCS Wetaskiwin. Yet, as Jack Armstrong observed ”*They certainly learned quickly and became extremely competent !”*

The ship and our Mess was always clean and neat, with everything in place. In some ways we were like a Fire station, everything had to be right so we could respond quickly and safely in an emergency.

Fortunately for this history, the Royal Canadian Navy had crew photos taken for each naval ship. For the HMCS Wetaskiwin, this occurred shortly after I boarded ship in March 1944.



Taken after HMCS Wetaskiwin returned from Galveston, Texas to Halifac circa March 1944

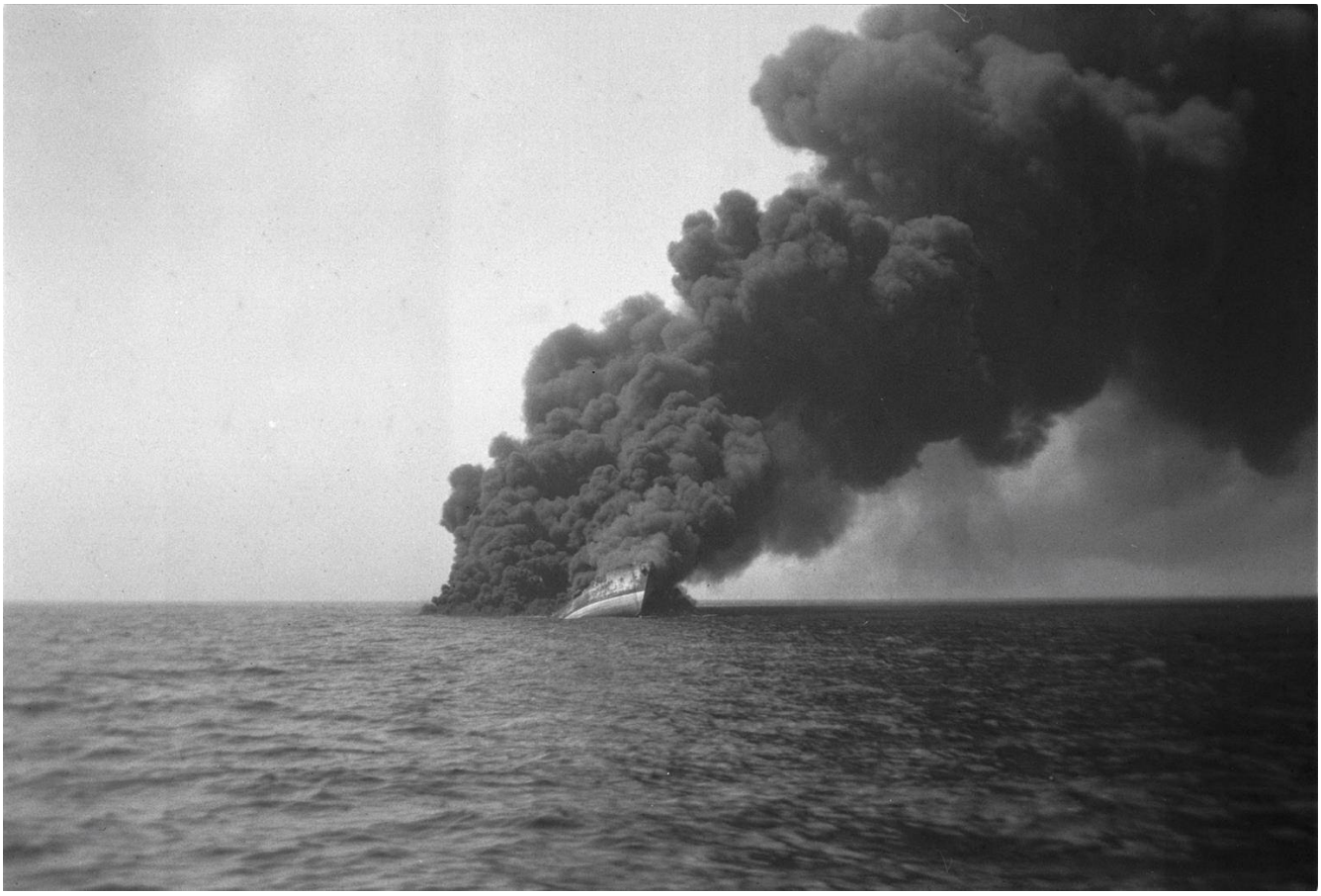


Jack Armstrong, just to the top right of cannon

The U-boats would try to attack the convoy singly or in large groups we called "Wolf Packs". Most time, we in the escort screen were able to fight them off, but sometimes they were able to get a torpedo through to the merchant ships. When this happened, the results were not pretty.

I had great admiration and concern for the crew of those slow, heavily loaded unarmed ships. Those men were the true heroes and without their bravery, and sacrifice, things would have been different for the people of Great Britain, Europe and for Allied forces.

I was always most deeply concerned for the crews of the tankers. They were riding with thousands of tons of oil. If they were struck by a torpedo, their cargo was usually ignited and spread over the ocean surface. The crews had two choices, go down with the ship, or jump off into a sea covered with burning oil. In the vast majority of times we were able to keep them safe and for this I was always grateful.

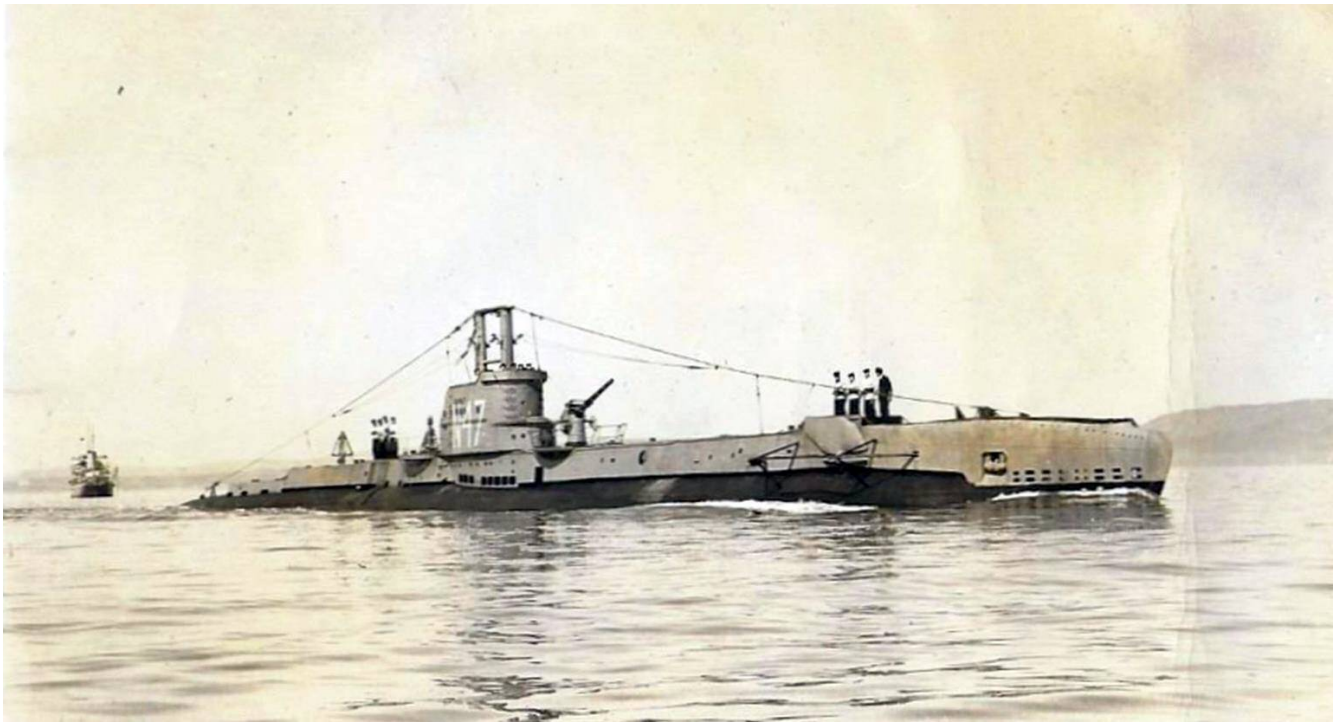


A stricken tanker ablaze and sinking after a U-boat attack. Tankers were prized targets and strategically placed in the centre of a convoy for maximum protection, but a skilful and daring U-boat captain could strike even at the heart of a convoy.

One regret I had was that I never had the opportunity to sail to northern Russia on the "Murmask Run". Those ships carried the supplies and weapons which enabled the Russians to stop the Nazis and drive them out of their country..

The Wolf Packs knew our ports of Departure and our destination and would wait quietly along routes they calculated we were most likely to follow. Although we were very capable in any sea battles, the surest way of getting our convoys to the British ports safely was to get by the U-boats undetected. There were numerous rules and procedures which helped to make our movements secret. Our sailing orders were sealed until we were at sea to prevent possible leaks to the Germans. We did not follow a

direct course to our destination but took many different paths and sailed in a zig-zag fashion. We had means to suppress the smoke from all ship's funnels. We followed strict blackout rules at night. - no navigation lights, all port holes and access to the outer deck had blackout curtains. All doors to the outside were equipped with switches that switched lights off automatically when opened. There were strict rules against throwing any trash overboard (which prevented me from throwing that Tiffy) – floating trash could lead a U-boat to the convoy. Also U-boats would watch for sea birds attracted by the trash.



N47 "HMS SEAWOLF", a Royal Navy submarine used as the "U-boat" for anti-submarine training by the RCN off Nova Scotia.

The U-boats greatest advantage was stealth. But once we detected one, the advantage became ours and I think our captain loved a fight. One day I was climbing the ladder to my action station when I looked out to see a torpedo track (a line of bubbles on the ocean surface. We were at full ahead and heeling hard in turn to port. This would turn our ship to a heading position toward the torpedo, making us a smaller target and heading toward the U-boat. (Torpedoes were attracted to a magnetic field given off by a steel ship. Our corvette, unlike merchant ships, was (degoussed" to remove the magnetic field.) The torpedo went harmlessly by and we tried to ram the U-boat. (A common tactic.) But it had made an emergency dive and we missed and began a depth charge attack. It was sometimes very difficult to know if we were successful, The U-boats had numerous tricks such as releasing some oil or air bubbles, or bits of debris, even life jackets or pieces of clothing. through its torpedo tubes. These would rise to the surface and make it appear that a U-boat had been blown open. then it would lie quietly on the ocean floor or slink away slowly under cover of exploding depth charges and noise from the propellers of the ships in the convoy.*

(* Degaussing - The term was first used by then-Commander Charles F. Goodeve, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, during World War II while trying to counter the German magnetic naval mines that were playing havoc with the British fleet. The mines detected the increase in the magnetic field when the steel in a ship concentrated the Earth's magnetic field over it. Admiralty scientists,

including Goodeve, developed a number of systems so the ship's magnetic field was the same as the background. The Germans used a device on a torpedo or a naval mine that detects its target by its magnetic field, and triggers the fuse for detonation. A magnetic pistol on a mine will allow the mine to detonate in proximity to a target, rather than actual contact, allowing the mine to cover a larger effective area. A magnetic pistol on a torpedo allows the torpedo to detonate underneath the ship, instead of upon impact with the side of the ship. As an explosion underneath a ship is contained between water and the ship, far more damage will result to the ship. The explosion will lift the ship out of the water and may break the keel of the ship, splitting it in two. Any hole created by the explosion will be on the bottom, causing more flooding. British ships, notably cruisers and battleships, were well protected by about 1943. Installing such special equipment was, however, far too expensive and difficult to service on all ships that would need it, so the navy developed an alternative called wiping, which Goodeve also devised, and which is now also called degaussing. This procedure simply dragged a large electrical cable along the side of the ship with a pulse of about 2000 amperes flowing through it. This was often performed while the merchant ships were waiting in harbour to sail in a convoy.

The Wetaskiwin captain took the recommended strategy.. A typical action by a Flower encountering a surfaced U-boat during convoy escort duties was to run directly at the submarine, forcing it to dive and thus limiting its speed and manoeuvrability. The corvette would then keep the submarine down and pre-occupied with avoiding depth charge attacks long enough to allow the convoy to pass safely.
.
Unfortunately this engagement against a U-boat was the only one I witnessed. When the whole crew would go to Battle Stations for combat against U-boats, all the Communication staff helped out, perhaps, like Sinbad, to pass ammunition, etc. I and one Coder were the exceptions. We were designated that when called to Battle Stations, our only job was to be the Telegraphist and Coder. These positions had to be staffed during such events,so I would even relieve the Telegraphist & Coder who were on duty. As a result I unfortunately cannot share much about actual combat situations as I was always inside the Radio Room

The previous descriptions about life aboard Flower class corvette's omit one characteristic - "Noise". If you are looking for peace and quiet, you might want to looks some place other than a corvette in the northern Atlantic.

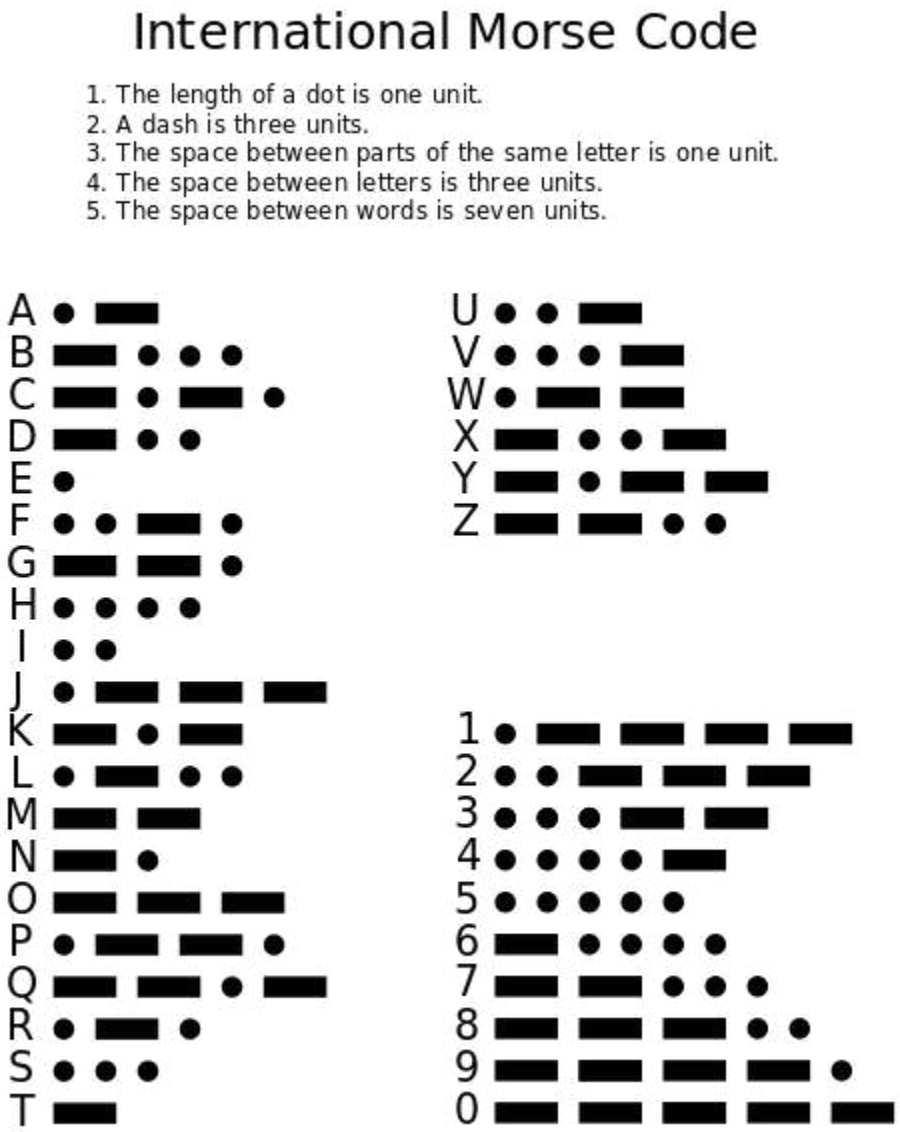
Day and night, there is the sound of the ship plowing through the waves, , the crests banging against the ship, the ship crashing into the valleys, the engines, the wind, the crew going about their duties, etc. But before long, these all fade from one's consciousness and are simply a background, unnoticed normal condition, perhaps even pleasant.

And, then there were the days when gunnery practice was called. I had no part to play in gunnery practice but I have stood on deck and watched. (Not a great idea without ear protection. When all those anti-aircraft guns, the Pom Poms, the Oerlikons and Vickers were banging away at once, the noise was incredible, and the main cannon was blasting off at a floating target we had released overboard I have marched behind a loud band, attended rock concerts, stood near the tracks when a train went by, stood under Niagara Falls, none compares with gunnery practice on a ship!

I thought as I watched, if we come under attack from the air, all that stuff our guns were shooting out might bring down some enemy aircraft or, if not, all that noise we are making might scare them away ! I often wondered if my current hearing loss was brought about by such exposure.

My Job

As a Telegraphist, communication was all by Morse code, usually encrypted, and it was one way. I never sent out Morse code messages while at sea, I only received them. Sending a message was much too dangerous as your location could be identified by the enemy. All my incoming communication came from shore locations.



Morse code is a method used in telecommunication to encode text characters as standardized sequences of two different signal duration called dots and dashes. In that regard it predated and was not so different than today's transmission of "on/off" binary computer code, but relied on the human ear. To send it and receive such code at a rapid speed was a significant skill. Morse code is named after Samuel Morse, an inventor of the telegraph. A significant advance was "Wireless" telegraphy or radiotelegraphy, the transmission of telegraph signals by radio waves. This permitted naval vessels to receive and transmit over long distances.

The Telegraphist was a highly respected rank as the Telegraphist needed to acquire a level of concentration few humans need or use in life and the ability to train the brain to read Morse despite noise interference, poor signal or weak signals and to record it with 100% accuracy simultaneously. A prized skill.

*I would listen to messages over the wireless and if the Wetaskiwin identifier came across, I would listen carefully to the encrypted Morse code message that would follow. The encrypted message would come in segments of 5 letters or numbers. I would write this down in the message form (*shown earlier*) and pass on this coded message to the Coder, who would either decipher it with a code book or enter it into a machine like a typewriter which would print out the deciphered message and then take this to the officer in charge.*

[Regulations strictly prohibited breaking radio silence 48 hours before sailing. Ships, as a group had the habit of tuning and testing their convoy escort frequency about an hour prior to leaving harbour. This always heralded within a matter of hours, the rendezvous with a convoy at WESTOMP (Western Ocean Meeting Point) off the Grand Bank. It was almost like sending the German U- boats an invitation on a silver platter. This practice of tuning and testing continued right into the 1960's despite the fact that operators were constantly reminded that this security violation would not be tolerated. Source: Radio Research Paper, Naval Radio Operations During World War II] *Jack does not remember any testing of radio equipment prior to sailing, so this concern did not apply to their corvette.*

Many telegraphists found it difficult to understand Morse code under at sea conditions which often came broken up or under noisy conditions but it became like a second language to me and I could listen to Voice of America or read a book while listening to Morse Code. Once I heard our address come across however I would focus only on the message that would follow and I was always able to receive and write Morse Code message without any effort at all.

I learned to identify who was sending the Morse code message much the same as you recognize a voice. You could tell whose "Fist" was sending the message, although you wouldn't know their name. This became a security feature as you would be suspicious of a strange "fist". At sea, between escort ships and with merchant vessels, we only used flag and signal lights as they were less likely to be intercepted.

While in port, we knew better than to talk about when we would be leaving or where we were going. There were posters everywhere in Canada saying "Loose Lips Sinks Ships ! "

The unfortunate part of being a Telegraphist is that you don't mix much with the rest of the crew as you are isolated in the Radio room or in your Communication mess to eat and sleep. You are pretty much limited to the Communications crew in our Mess.

Our prime means of attack, depth charges also represented a significant hazard. It was a a blessing that no depth charges broke lose during my time aboard. It had happened before. A depth charge is shaped like and looks like a 40 gallon oil drum and weighs 420 pounds. When one breaks loose and falls off its rail to the after deck it poses a serious danger to seamen trying to corral it in a tumultuous sea and set it back on the rail. There is little danger of explosion, but in rolling around it can do a lot of damage and can, and often did, break a leg.

Sailors on HMCS Port Arthur sitting on depth charges – a major hazard if one broke loose in heavy seas

Attacking U-boats with depth charges could also be dangerous to the attacking vessel. Convoy SC 109, for which the Wetaskiwin provided escort, lost one ship torpedoed by U-43 and destroyer Saguenay was irreparably damaged when rammed by the Panamanian freighter Azra in the confusion off Cape Race, Newfoundland. The impact of the collision set off Saguenay's depth charges, which blew off her stern.

I recall a time when I thought our ship Wetaskiwin was lost due to a depth charge. We thought the sub was not very deep, maybe 50 feet or so, so we set the depth charge for a shallow explosion but our ship was too slow getting away and there was a huge explosion. The sound and impact in the ship was incredible and we all thought we were goners but, amazingly, the Wetaskiwin, once again, survived with no damage.

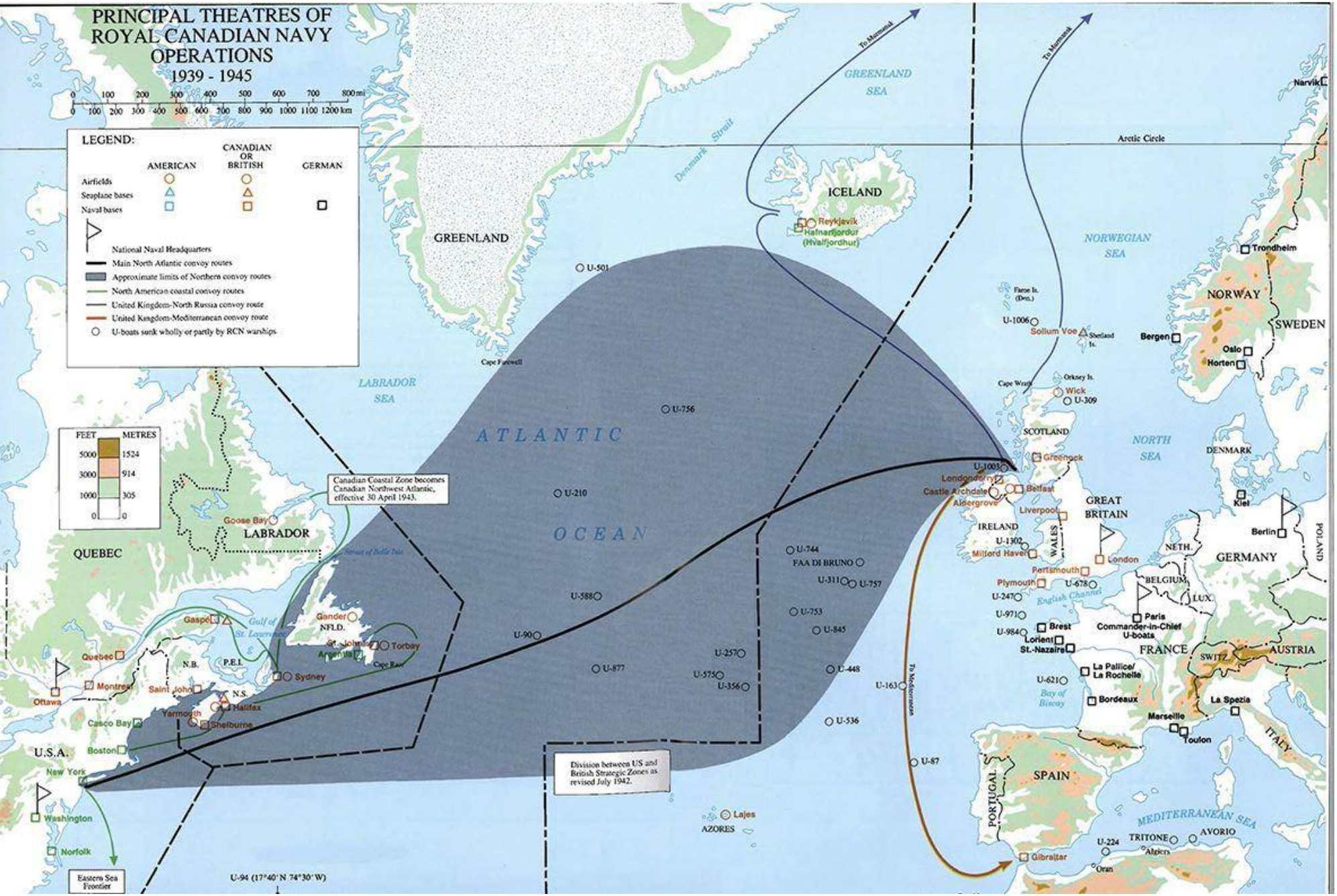
Depth Charges exploding off HMCS Saguenay with convoy behind

The 16-knot (30 km/h) top speed of the Flower-class ships made effective pursuit of a surfaced U-boat (about 17 knots) impossible, though it was adequate to manoeuvre around submerged U-boats or convoys, both of which ran at a typical maximum of 8 knots, and sometimes much less in poor weather. The low speed also made it difficult for Flowers to catch up with the convoy after action.

This technique of corvette's against individual U-boats was hampered when the Kriegsmarine began deploying its U-boats in "wolf-pack" attacks intended to overwhelm the escort warships of a convoy and allow at least one of the submarines to attack the merchant vessels. Upgrades in sensors and armament for the Flowers, such as radar, HF/DF, depth charge projectors, and ASDIC, meant these small warships were well equipped to detect and defend against such attacks, but the tactical advantage often lay with the attackers, who could operate a cat-and-mouse series of attacks intended to draw the defending Flower off-station.

Suppressing and preventing u-boats from attacking rather than tracking and destroying them were key to convoy safety. Success for the Flowers, therefore, should be measured in terms of tonnage protected, rather than U-boats sunk. Typical reports of convoy actions by these craft include numerous instances of U-boat detection near a convoy, followed by brief engagements using guns or depth charges and a rapid return to station so another U-boat could not take advantage of the initial skirmish to attack the unguarded convoy. Continuous actions of this kind against a numerically superior U-boat pack demanded considerable seamanship skills from all concerned, and were very wearing on the crews.

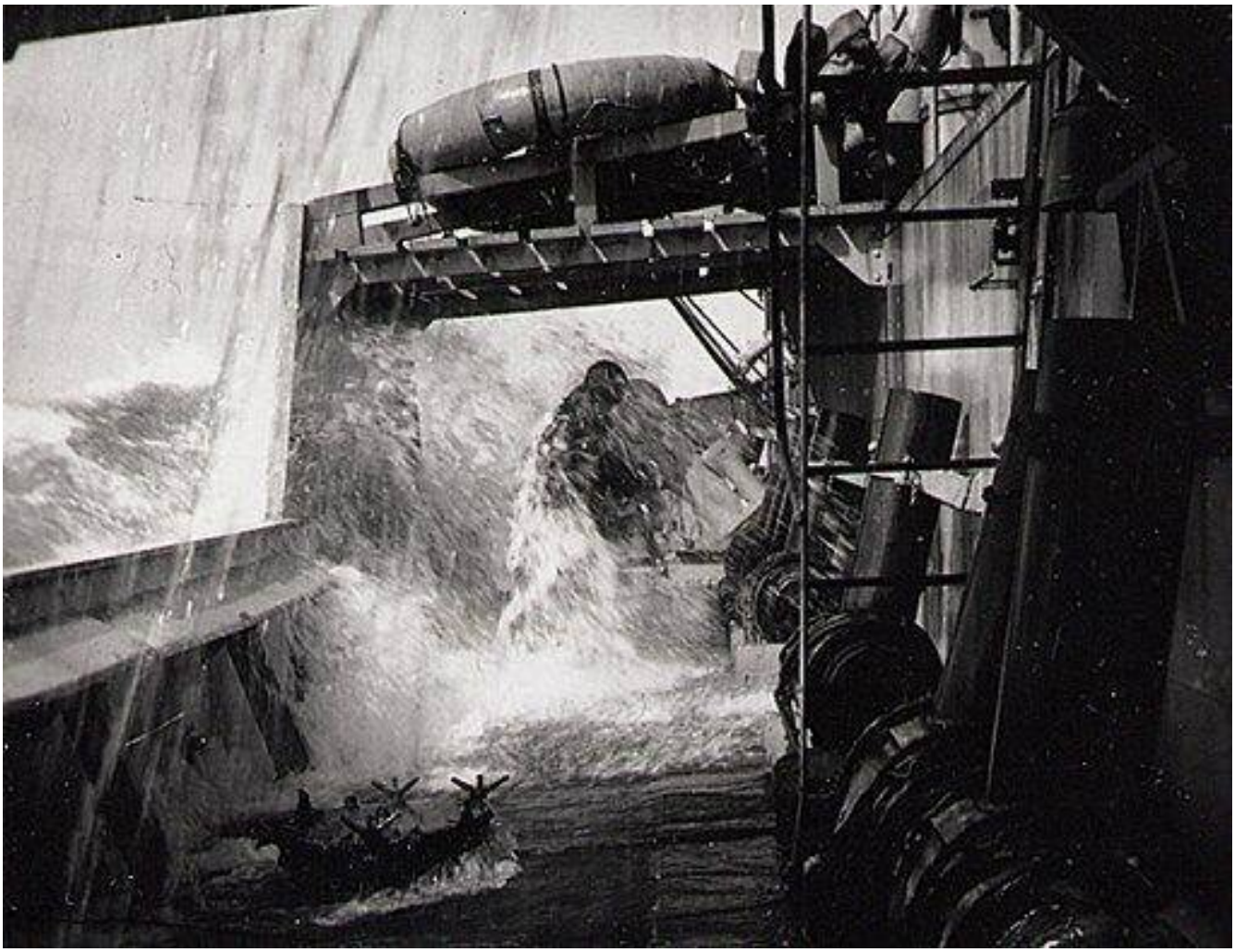
The next graphic shows the convoy routes and principal theatres of operation of the Royal Canadian navy.


PRINCIPAL THEATRES OF ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY OPERATIONS 1939 - 1945
0 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 mi
0 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1100 1200 km
LEGEND:
AMERICAN
CANADIAN OR BRITISH
GERMAN
Airfields
Seaplane bases
Naval bases
National Naval Headquarters
Main North Atlantic convoy routes
Approximate limits of Northern convoy routes
North American coastal convoy routes
United Kingdom-North Russia convoy route
United Kingdom-Mediterranean convoy route
U-boats sunk wholly or partly by RCN warships
FEET METRES
5000 1524
3000 914
1000 305
0 0
Canadian Coastal Zone becomes Canadian Northwest Atlantic, effective 30 April 1943.
Division between US and British Strategic Zones as revised July 1942.
U-94 (17°40'N 74°30'W)
GREENLAND SEA
NORWEGIAN SEA
NORTH SEA
LABRADOR SEA
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Arctic Circle
Denmark Strait
To Murmansk
ICELAND
Reykjavik
Hafnarfjordur (Hvalfjordhur)
GREENLAND
Cape Farewell
U-501
U-756
U-210
U-588
U-90
U-877
U-257
U-575
U-356
U-744
FAA DI BRUNO
U-311
U-757
U-753
U-845
U-448
U-163
U-536
U-87
Lajes
AZORES
Faroe Is. (Den.)
U-1006
Sollum Voe
Shetland Is.
Orkney Is.
Cape Wrath
Wick
U-309
SCOTLAND
Greenock
U-1003
Londonderry
Castle Archdale
Aldergrove
Belfast
Liverpool
GREAT BRITAIN
IRELAND
U-1302
Milford Haven
WALES
London
Portsmouth
Plymouth
U-678
U-247
U-971
U-984
English Channel
Brest
Lorient
St.-Nazaire
Commander-in-Chief U-boats
Paris
BELGIUM
LUX
NETH.
FRANCE
SWITZ
AUSTRIA
La Pallice/ La Rochelle
U-621
Bay of Biscay
Bordeaux
Marseille
Toulon
La Spezia
ITALY
To Mediterranean
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
Gibraltar
U-224
TRITONE
AVORIO
Algiers
Oran
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Narvik
Trondheim
NORWAY
SWEDEN
Bergen
Oslo
Horten
DENMARK
Kiel
Berlin
GERMANY
POLAND
Goose Bay
LABRADOR
QUEBEC
Strait of Belle Isle
Gaspe
Gulf of St. Lawrence
Gander
NFLD.
St. John's
Torbay
Argentia
Cape Race
Sydney
N.B.
P.E.I.
N.S.
Halifax
Yarmouth
Shelburne
Quebec
Montreal
Ottawa
Saint John
Casco Bay
Boston
U.S.A.
New York
Washington
Norfolk
Eastern Sea Frontier

Ship diving in Atlantic waves

View of convoy and another corvette from deck of HMCS Wetaskiwin

In addition to U- boats, we faced other dangers. The Sea itself, the North Atlantic is notorious for its storms, the pitch black nights and the ice.



A wave of cold sea water pours over a sailor on HMCS Trillium

James B. Lamb, author of "The Corvette Navy" and "On the Triangle Run" describes in the latter book an all too common night time call out. "At half past two in the morning, during our watch below, they tumble us out; every upper deck seaman is needed for some emergency. We peer blearily from our swaying hammocks at a world gone mad, a world lit only by dim blue lights {always black out conditions] and filled with the terrible noise and violence of the hurricane outside. We step out in our stocking feet into the six inches of cold salt water that has flooded in over the fo'c;sle-door coamimg, [then]hurled against a stauchion as the ship crashes down into the trough, then clutch at our hammocks for support as our whole world suddenly rushes upward, borne by a mountainous sea. The insensate din, the motion, the rushing water overwhelm the senses, we push our sodden feet into our sea-boots and shrug into our cowled duffle coats in a kind of numbed stupor before groping towards the door to the well-deck, pushing off the dog clips that hold it shut, and peering out at the terrible scene outside.

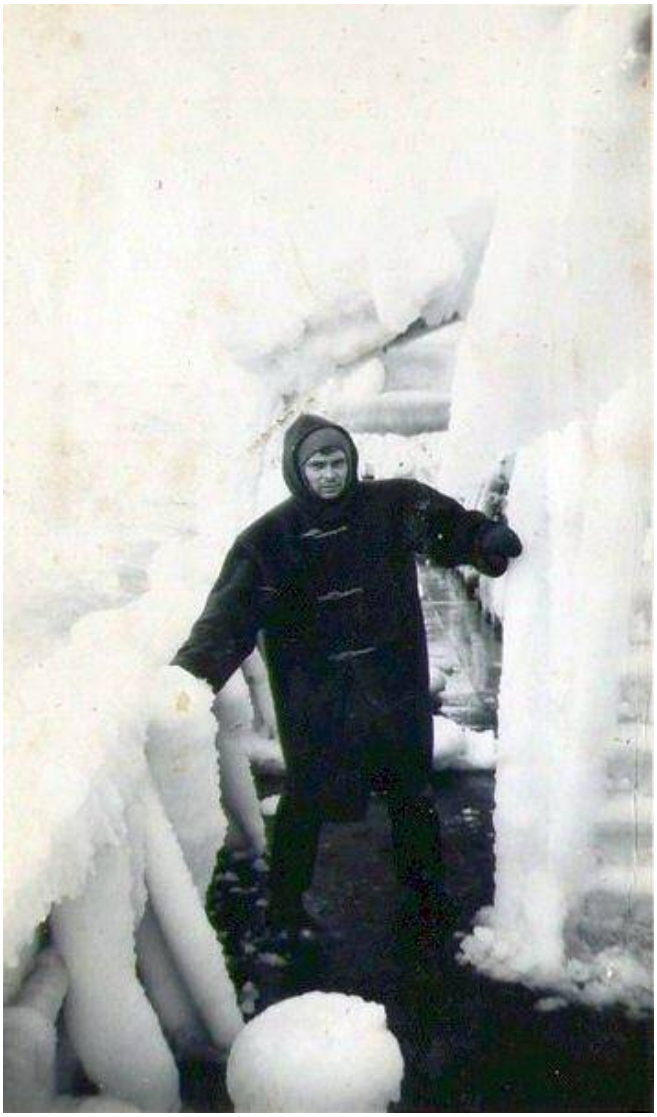
Our little corvette is staggering to windward into a maelstorm of roaring, breaking water and flying spray, rolling her waist-decks under: the shrieking of the wind numbs the mind, the tumult of the driven sea fills the black void all about us. One by one we catch the taut lifeline with both hands and fight our

way aft down the port side as the ship rolls to starboard. Before we are halfway along, the ship rolls back to port, and we hold on for dear life as the furious sea thunders in over the bulwark soaking us to the armpits and threatening to carry us off with it into the blackness beyond. As the water recedes, we stumble on to reach the relative security of the quarterdeck, and join the knot of shadowy figures huddled there in the lee of the mine-sweeping winch..... Fear is at our elbows through all the crowded hours that follow."

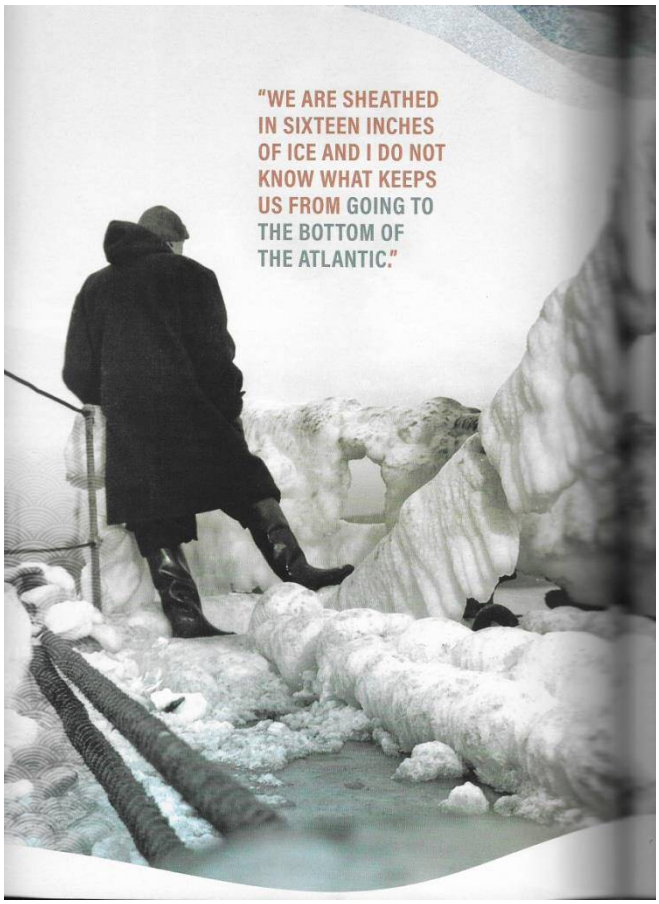
Walter Faraday Wright climbing out of a hatch on a nice day onto the quarter deck

On this spray swept quarter deck it does not matter whether your parents are rich or poor, whether you went to university or flunked out of elementary school, no wealthy or influential connections can help you now. Here all that matters is what you are and we learn to recognize character and to respect it above mere size or strength or intellect, in even the puniest and most seasick among us...."

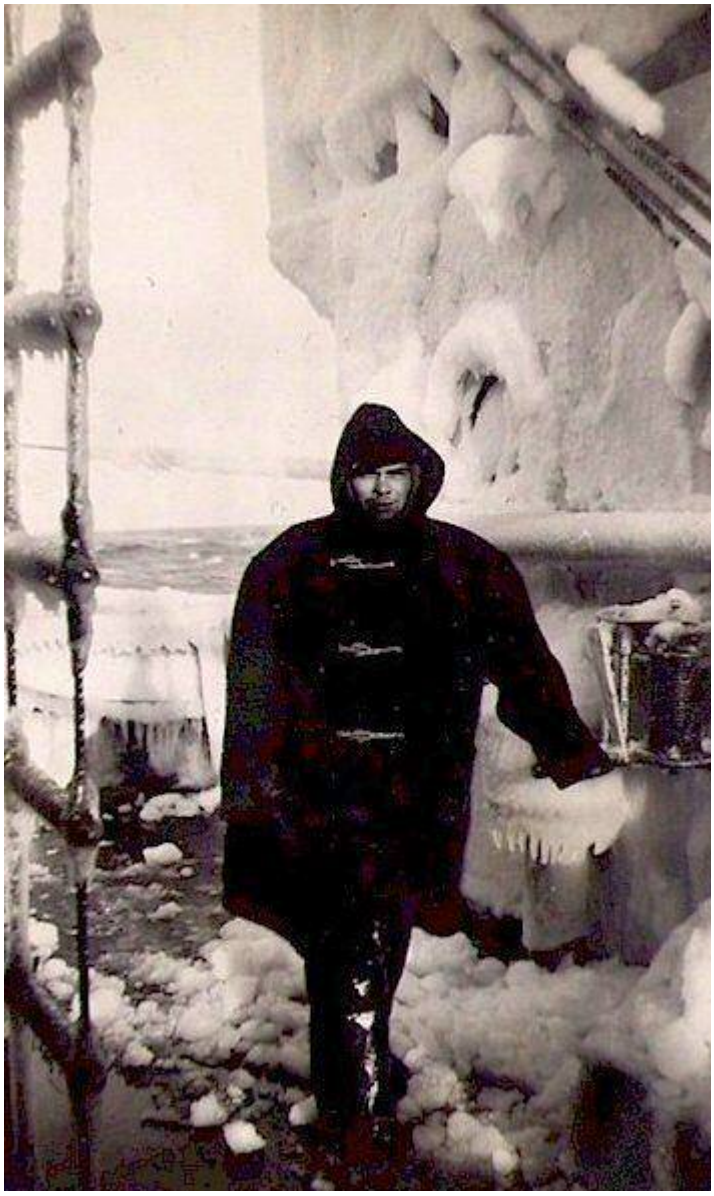
All oceans have storms but the north Atlantic, in addition to violent storms, had bitterly cold weather. One time we were just north of Iceland. It was stormy and very cold when the call came "All hands on deck to chip ice." The ship was pitching and rolling through huge waves. Spray was soaking everything, as high even as our mast-head, and, as it landed on the surface, it froze. A thick, and growing, layer of ice was adding tons of weight where it was most dangerous. We would roll to one side so far it would seem the mast must hit the water and we would turn upside – goodbye good ship Wetaskiwin and all your crew. In that water, life expectancy would be a few minutes at most. But each time we would hang there for what seemed like a long time then slowly start to roll the other way. Meantime we chipped ice as though our life depended on it and it probably did. Chipping ice was unfortunately all too common !



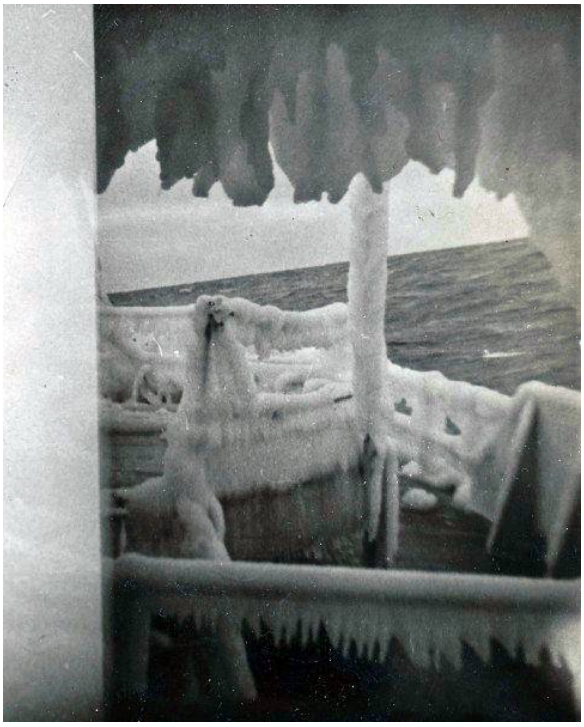
Ice covered Wetaskiwin



Iced HMCS Wetaskiwin off Newfoundland
(Source: Legion – Canada's Ultimate Story, Special Edition "Battle of the St. Lawrence", cover & p.501, vol.6, #3, 2022)



Literally everything was covered in icy spray



Thick coating of ice from Wheelhouse – photo Bernie Forbes

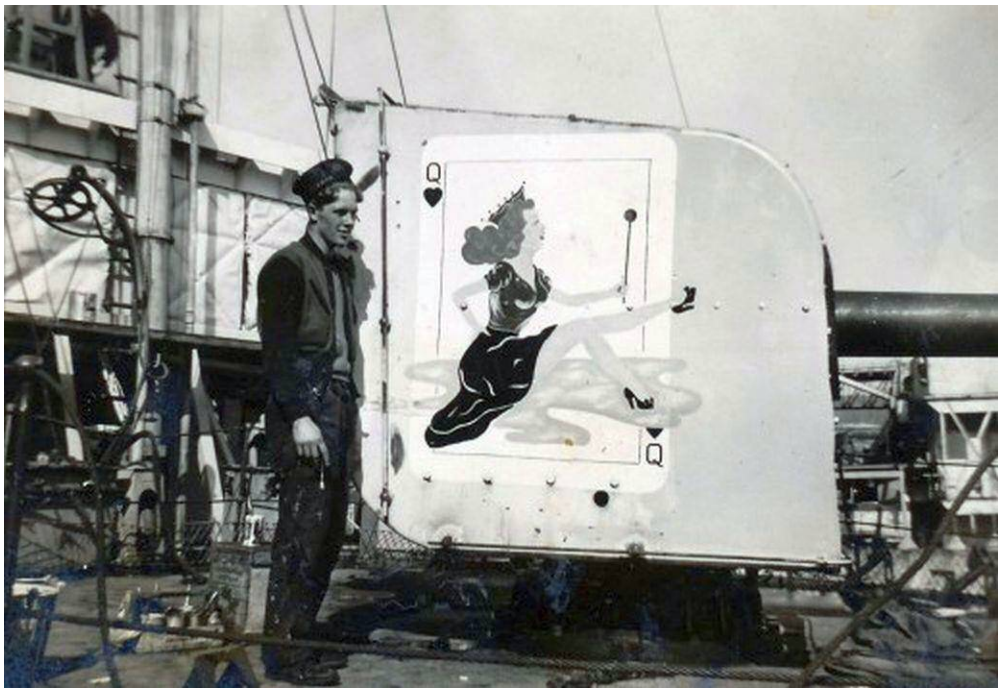
Icy sea & ship

Iced coiled rope

Amazingly, and a blessing that no one ever slipped and washed overboard!

HMCS Wetaskiwin's Unofficial Badge

Bernie Forbes standing next to his finished painting of the Wet Ass Queen - an irreverent interpretation of the ship's name, HMCS Wetaskiwin.



Between 1910 and 1948, there were no official badges or insignia for Royal Canadian Navy's ships.Nevertheless Jack recalls*, during the Second World War, many ships in the rapidly expanding RCN had an emblem which was displayed in various ways. Many consisted of a cartoon character such as Donald Duck or Snoopy. The Wetaskiwin's emblem displayed a beautiful lady falling bottom first into a puddle of water. derived from the ship's name Wetaskiwin which became Wet Ass Queen.'*

She was painted on our ship's main gun shield by a mess-mate of mine, Bernie Forbes, from Montreal. Before enlisting Bernie had been a "commercial artist". It was very well done, brilliant and the Queen's expression and the imagery was excellent. Indeed, it made the ship well known in our navy.

The original "wet ass queen" painting from the Wetaskiwin's wardroom bulkhead hangs on the wall at the Crow's Nest Officer's Club in St. John's Newfoundland. . The second was painted by Bernie Forbes, a rating (ordinary seaman), at the request of the Wetaskiwin's CO, in 1942. Because Forbes was not an officer, he was not permitted in the club to see the original and had to paint the gun shield based on descriptions of the original from the ship's officers.

This is Bernie Forbes recollections:
"This is a 90 year old, trying to recall what happened 60 years ago. Please be patient and understanding. My name is Bernie Forbes. I joined the navy in June 1940 in Montreal [Quebec] at the HMCS Donnacona. When I first boarded the [HMCS] Wetaskiwin in Newfie John [St. John's, Newfoundland], she had recently been completely repainted to the newly required corvette camouflage look. Most of the crew had been replaced but there still remained a few old hands who, vaguely recalled, a weather beaten gunshield, image of a Queen of Hearts. From their description and being artistically inclined, I was able to come up with a close replica of the painting that once hung in the officer's wardroom. With the CO's approval [Commanding Officer], I painted the five by seven foot playing card logo of a shapely looking queen of hearts sitting in a puddle of water.

The Wetaskiwin became well known on both sides of the Atlantic as the Wet Ass Queen. Until the end of the war [in May, 1945], I was responsible for keeping her perky and with every repaint or retouch-up, I couldn't resist lifting her skirt a little and increasing her bust one size larger. Today, the original painting of the queen, which went missing from the ship's wardroom, hangs in the Crow's Nest, Officer's Club in St. John's, Newfoundland. One of the most vivid memories was sailing up the lock Foyle [the River Foyle in Northern Ireland] towards Londonderry at sunrise. The sight of the green Irish hills sloping down to meet the calm blue waters of the Foyle, it was just like arriving in heaven from hell. It was while sailing up the Florida coast that we were returning to Newfoundland, and over our loud hailer, (our PA system) [Public Address System], announced that our troops had landed in Normandy [on June 6, 1944]. A great cheer went up from the crew but moments later, there was complete silence, as our thoughts turned to those who were in the thick of battle at that very moment. We all gathered on the quarterdeck and the captain conducted a short service with prayers. The navy tended to move people frequently but I managed to stay on the [HMCS] Wetaskiwin from September 1942 until June 1945, only because I was able to arrange with the rest of my communications department to remove my name if it appeared on any transfer orders. In 1945 during my long leave in Montreal, VJ Day was declared [Victory over Japan Day, August 15, 1945]] and I reported to Montreal headquarters expecting my discharge to be ordered but I was ordered to return to my ship in Halifax [Nova Scotia]. Upon arrival, I was informed that the [HMCS] Wetaskiwin was no longer in service and was to be decommissioned. This news was heartbreaking to me, it was like returning home without a house, family or friends and gone were all my personal treasures along with my share of canteen profits that were to be divided amongst the crew according to the length of time served onboard, not according to the rank. I learned later that my share would have been fairly substantial. *[Jack fared no better & does not recall any canteen profits dispersed.]* Within days, I reported to the minesweeper, HMCS

Mahone and spent a short time sweeping the east coast waters. August the 5th, 1945, I stepped ashore with a slip in my hand ordering me to report to headquarters where I received my discharge and train ticket home." - Bernie Forbes (Source: The Memory Project – Veteran Stories)

A mural of the Wet Ass Queen now adorns the Royal Canadian Legion hall in Wetaskiwin, Alberta.

I often thought there was more to it than nice art work. I wondered if the emblem could provide a peek into the character of the ship and her crew. Well, the emblem was whimsical and light hearted, and, as time went on, I found it to be both insightful and appropriate.

It is well known that men, living a long period of time in tight quarters, in difficult conditions, can often become irritable, even aggressive. But not on the Wetaskiwin. The Wet Ass Queen was a happy ship. Morale was great from the Captain all the way down. In our mess, although it was fairly crowded with 12 men, I don't remember ever hearing harsh words, words of anger or complaint. It was as though, although the words were never spoken, we would all rather be home, yet we are here, let's make the best of it. And the good ship Wetaskiwin was saying "Relax, don't worry, I'll look after you and I'll keep you safe."

Yes, I think our emblem was a good tip-off to the character of the ship and her crew, and her painter, Bernie Forbes, was a bright, cheerful crew mate.

Shipmate Joe Rouble by Wet Ass Queen

It appears that the HMCS Wetaskiwin has just taken on provisions prior to another escort. Note the box labeled Canada Packers. Jack can be just seen in the background

While researching what provisions were usually taken on board, I was surprised at the amount of rum stored on board. Jack told me " Every day at 11 am, we received a tot of grog, roughly an ounce and a half of rum.:"

The website ReadyAyeReady.com describes this."UP SPIRITS" was the age old call for men of the Royal Navy and, after 1910, ships of the Royal Canadian Navy, to muster for their daily issue of rum. Two and a half ounces as a "TOT" of neat rum, once a day at NOON. Played on the Bosn's call, this to men of the Navy was the most welcomed and merriest of the three dozen odd orders that could be relayed via the Bosn's pipe.

The last time this particular call was heard at 6 bells in the forenoon watch of the ships of the R.N. was July 31, 1970, and March 31, 1972 in Canadian ships... bringing to an end a tradition over 300 years old in British ships and 62 years old in Canadian ships.

Christmas was also a special time.

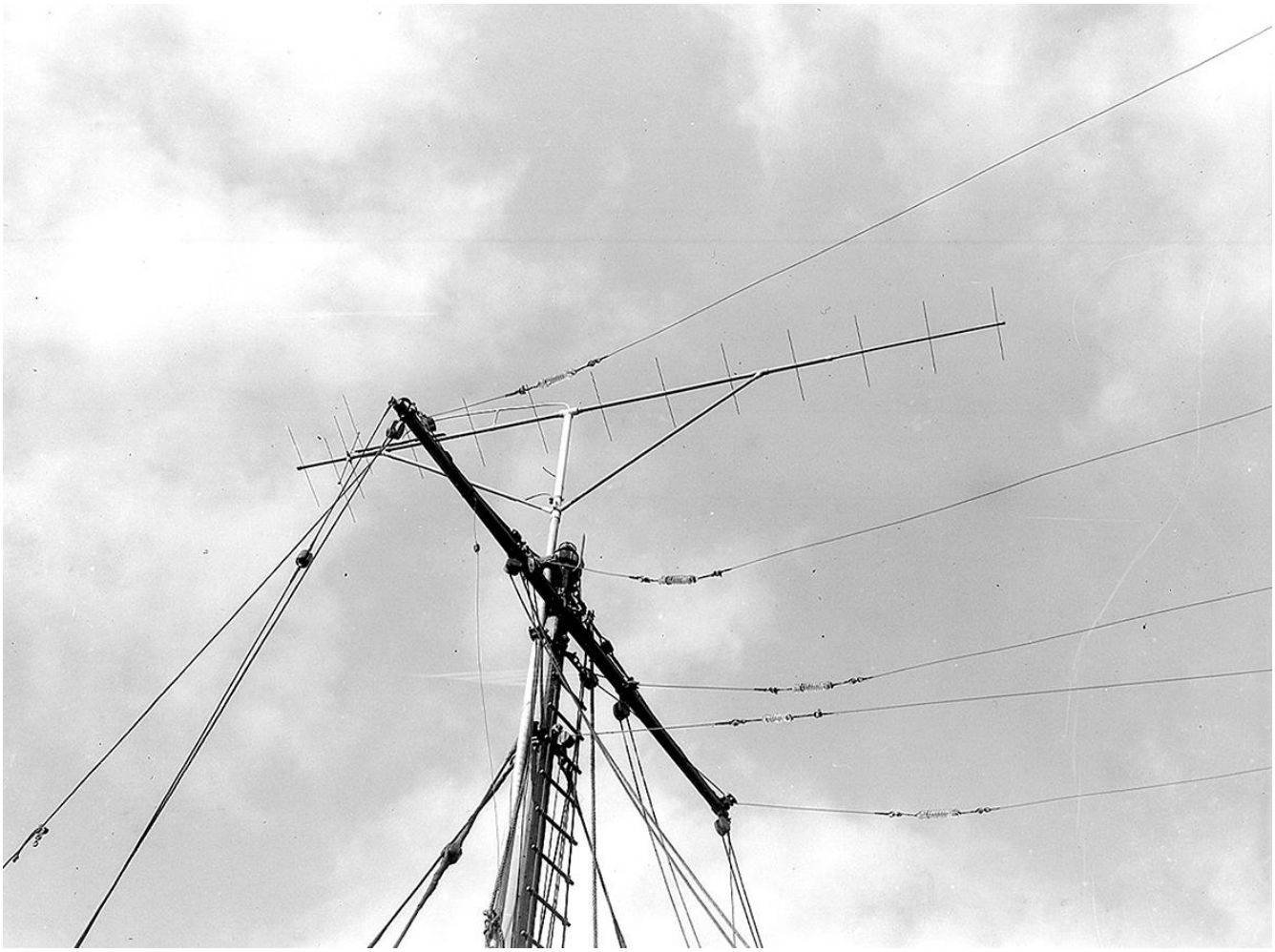
The Captain is on the left, the others may, or may not have been officers as it was a custom on that day to change outfits and clearly one sailor has an officer's hat and the officer the sailor's.

These lads look like they just put on an officer's uniform – it was a happy ship.

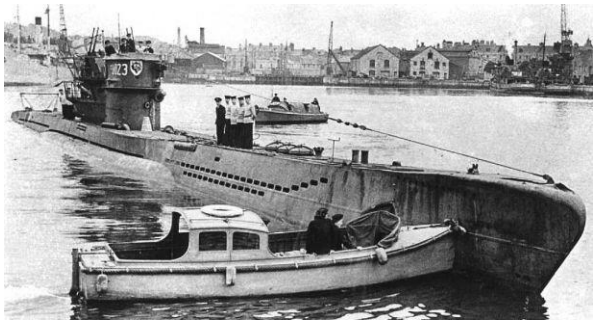
There were quiet times when the weather was good. During these times, I liked to sit out on the Quarter Deck and read a book. If it was cold, I had a spot close to the funnel, which was nice and warm and sheltered from the wind.

Many of the sea's creatures are curious characters. I liked to stand at the rail to watch schools of dolphins who came to investigate us and stayed to play in our bow-wave. I could see that they were having a great time.

Another creature I liked to watch was the Portuguese man-of war, a jelly fish. They travel in large numbers and cover a wide area of the sea surface. They have a large white fin on top which protrudes above the surface about two feet. This acts like a sail and is their way to travel. They are very beautiful to watch. But don't get too close. They are very poisonous to touch.



During one quiet time, I was curious what it would be like to climb to the top of the ship's antenna. One day, as a lark, I decided to find out and I started up the mast. The rope ladder was moving with each step and the mast itself was swaying. When I secured myself to the masthead, I looked down and was startled to not see the ship but just tossing waves below me, the ship was swaying in the waves so much that the mast was way over the water. Then it would sway to the opposite side. It was an experience I will never forget, a strange and unsettling feeling ! I was extremely lucky to have not gotten into big trouble for my wee adventure.



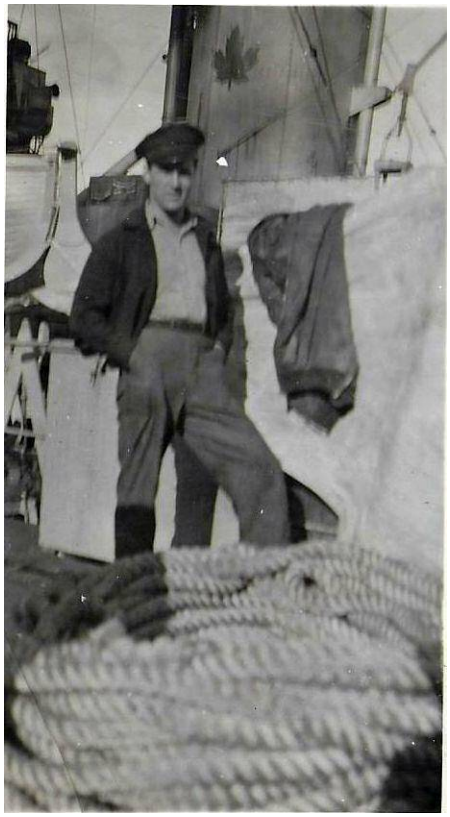
At one time while docked, there was a captured U-boat anchored not far from our vessel, so a few of us went on board. I am sorry I cannot describe what it was like below deck.. After looking down the hatch, I had no interest going in. I am claustrophobic and it looked so confined in there. I really felt sorry for the sailors who had to spend the war in such a cramped uncomfortable space.

Communication Staff

Signalman Al Wade

Al Wade

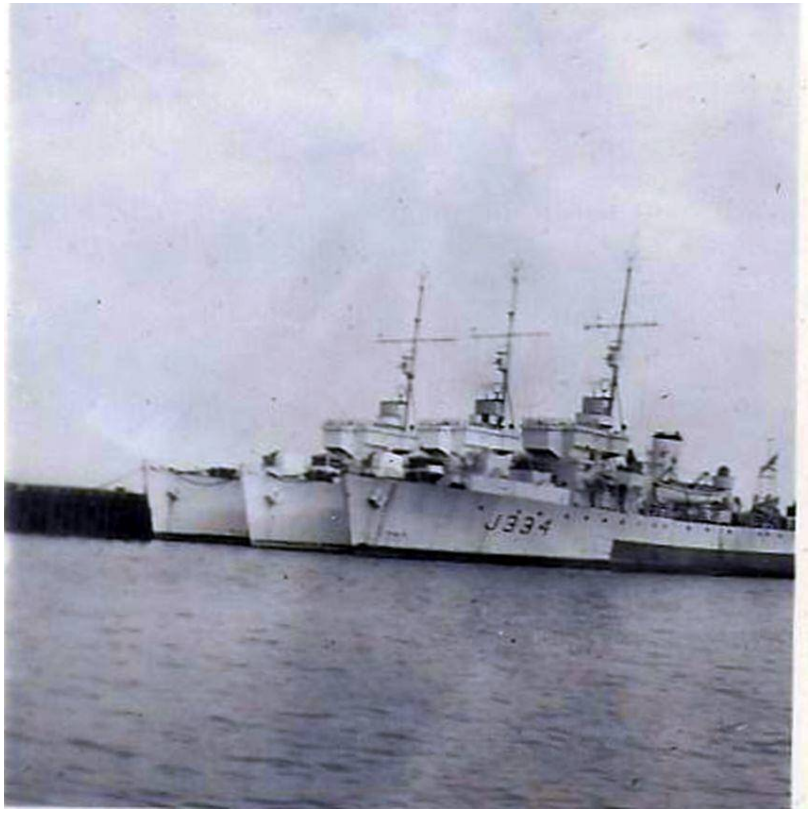
Sinbad, a Telegraphist



My longest time at sea without seeing any land was 19 days. We had escorted a convoy eastward to the Azores where we exchanged it for one heading west. It was always nice to arrive in port, but this time it was especially welcome. The best thing about landing in port was mail call. I almost always had mail waiting – letters from my Mom and letters from friends in Halifax and Carleton Place.

Despite regularly going to Iceland and Londonderry Ireland, I never visited these ports. Even our trip to Bermuda and the Azores did not include time ashore. We only left the ship at Halifax, New York City, St. John's Newfoundland & Sydney Cape Breton. So going ashore was really always a treat. Strangely, one of the first adaptations to shore leave was adjusting to being on a stationary surface. The dock would initially feel like it was moving all over the place. But this would soon pass.

Sometimes we got lucky and the locals would offer to pick us up on their vessel. Below is an example where a small sailboat offered us a ride ashore.



3 Mine-sweepers together in port #334 HMCS Sault St. Marie

Here I am, happy to be going ashore.

.

Time ashore or dockside was always special. On this occasion, I got to enjoy a visiting local dog.

Naval vessels in port

That's me with a temporary pet

When we got really lucky, we had a visit from the Navy Wrens .

The Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS or "Wrens") was an element of the Royal Canadian Navy that was active during the Second World War and post-war as part of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve until unification in 1968. The WRCNS was in operation from October 1942 to August 1946.
Women's service in the military during the Second World War challenged the tradition of all-male armed forces. Between 1942 and 1946 close to 7000 volunteers enlisted in the WRCNS and served in 26 non-combatant occupations & trades in Canadian naval bases at home or abroad. WRENS filled or performed cipher duties, clerical work, teleprinter operations, telephone switchboard operator, wireless telegraphic operator, coder duties, cook, steward, messenger, elevator operator, motor transport driver, : wardroom attendant, quarters assistant, laundress, supply assistant, stenographer, confidential book corrector, postal clerk, secretary, pay writer, communications and operations specialist, sail maker, sick berth attendant, and regulator. By the end of the war, 39 trades had been declared open to the Wrens.

By late 1943, nearly 1000 Wrens worked in the Halifax area and lived in HMCS Stadacona, within sight of this spot. The RRCNS made an outstanding contribution to Allied victory, paved the way for future generations of Canadian service women and raised questions about the equality of women in the civilian world.

Mail On-board Naval Vessels

I pretty much never called home. Phone calls were too expensive and I never had money. I wrote letters to family and a couple girl friends. I remember having to pay 4 cents for a stamp. There was someone on the ship who was responsible for the mail. It was put in a mail bag and it was gone. Then it went to a censor. We received mail when we came ashore addressed to Jack Armstrong, Wetaskiwin RCN, c/o Halifax Fleet HQ and then distributed by the fleet. So I might get mail in whatever port I went to.

It was such a wonderful feeling to get mail. When the mail came, everyone rushed to receive mail. I felt sorry for the men who didn't get mail. It was more than just mail, also packages of things that people thought we would need such as homemade socks, coolies, etc. Such mail and packages were great for morale. Arriving at a port meant the possible thrill of getting mail or a parcel from family or friends. It was a huge boost in morale and we would all stand around to see if there was something for us.

Imagine saying goodbye to your husband, boyfriend or son, knowing that you will not see his face or hear his voice for years — maybe forever. That's why mail was absolutely critical during wartime, both for the boys over there and the folks back home. And never more so than at Christmas. (Excellent material by Elinor Florence on WW2 mail.) When it came to long separations, the countries that had it the worst were Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The British servicemen went home on leave, and so did the Germans and the Russians and the Italians. The Americans also endured long separations, although they didn't start going overseas until early 1942, after they entered the war. On the other hand, some Canadians left home in 1939 and didn't see their families again until 1945. That's six Christmases far away from home!

Since the only contact with their families was through letters, no wonder the mail was so vital. The isolation of the men overseas, the hardships, and the homesickness was alleviated only by the presence of a letter from home. It was a shot in the arm, an inspirational message from the loved ones left behind, and a reminder about the way of life they were fighting for. And people sent thousands of parcels overseas, containing hand-knitted socks and scarves, soap, dried fruit and candy. The items were wrapped in heavy cotton fabric and sewed shut with needle and thread. The addresses were inked on the surface of the cloth with a fountain pen.

To make the separations even worse, people on the home front couldn't look up their son's location on a map, or follow the progress of his regiment or naval vessel. All that was kept a secret, the public weren't allowed to know where he was or what he was doing. So all the mail went through a central depot and was readdressed by postal workers on the other side.

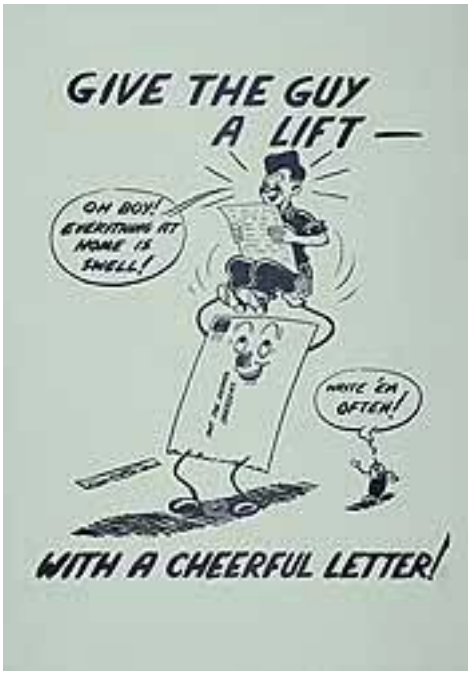
Canadian Mail Censorship
Wartime letter-writers also had the uncomfortable knowledge that someone was reading all their letters,
Just to make sure they weren't letting something slip or acting as an enemy alien, all Canadian and foreign letters received and send by soldiers were read and censored before reaching their destinations. Fear of enemy aliens posing as Canadian citizens created a culture of fear and secrecy across the country. The public was sheilded from sensitive information and letters were only received after being approved by military personnel. Names and ranks of officers or fellow servicemen, travel plans, names of bases, mention of raids or other military actions – all were blacked out, or sometimes even cut out with scissors by the censors

Self Censorship
Both England and Canada used censorship of letters to protect citizens and maintain support for the war effort. Many people used self-censorship to ensure unaltered letters reach the recipient. This became wide practice and supported by Canadian and American citizens on the home-front as well as soldiers overseas, and there was an onslought of propaganda released around this time encouraging family members and soldiers alike to be mindful of what they included in their letters. Below is a typical Canadian poster.

Newspapers and advertisers all encouraged mail to the men in uniform. Below Star Weekly, now Toronto Star cover pages.

In order to save valuable cargo space on planes and ships, some military mail was microfilmed. A roll of

microfilm could contain up to 20,000 letters. Once the microfilm was sent to the receiving station, it was photographically reproduced and mailed to the addressee, but only after being inspected by censors.

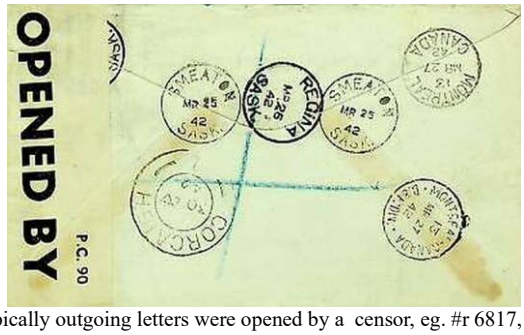


Transporting all that mail back and forth across Canada and the oceans was a huge job. At the outset of war, the Canadian Postal Corps had 50 personnel. By the end, there were 5,000 people operating 170 field post offices at bases across Canada, plus exotic locales such as Cairo, Bombay and Karachi. Letters or parcels were delivered to the most remote theatre of war. The Base Post Office in Ottawa was the heart of the vast, far-flung operation. It was located in a five-storey brick building on Nicholas Street. Every piece of mail addressed to a man or woman overseas, in either the army or the air force, or stationed at a base in Canada, went through this depot. Navy mail went to a Halifax depot. (All incoming mail went through civilian post offices.) And it was all censored.

The censor's job was a mind numbing task. To ensure Christmas mail got through, Ottawa high school students were brought in to help with the huge volume.

This above photo shows some of those dedicated postal workers in Ottawa. There were no computers then — every piece of mail had to be read and sorted by hand. It was tedious, back-breaking labour.The volumes grew exponentially, like the war effort itself. In 1939, Ottawa was moving fifteen bags of mail a day. The following year the daily average had grown to 255 bags and in 1941, it hit 450. Two years later, the staff was processing 3,000 bags per day and working some incredible hours. Members of 'The Morale Squadron," as they called themselves, understood that mail was a priceless commodity and a vitally important weapon in the battle for victory.

Outgoing Canadian mail all went through censors.



Typically outgoing letters were opened by a censor, eg. #r 6817, any comments of concern would be blacked out or cut out, then resealed with tape..

A typical letter sent from a sailor on board a Canadian Naval vessel. Note no date, ship name, ship type or location.

None of Jacks wartime mail survived. "*One of my girlfriends had a whole stack of my mail tied in a pink ribbon. I told her to throw it out and we threw it into the wood stove. I wanted to put the war behind me,*"

New York City -

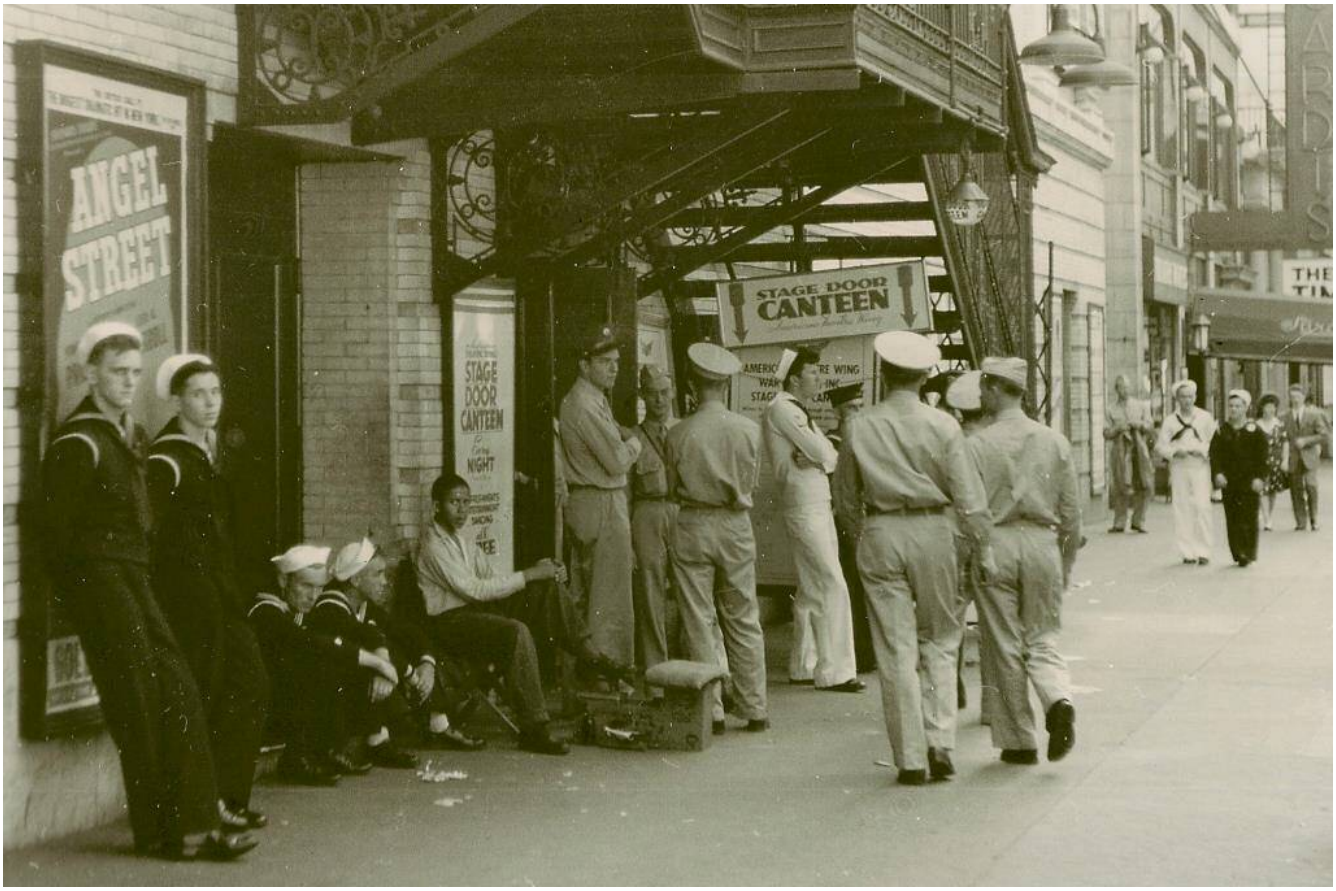
It is always nice to come in to port but some are nicer than others. My favourite port of call was New York City. It was a beautiful city with lots to do and the American people were warm and friendly and very generous and they sure knew how to make the people in uniform forget about the war for a while. We always tied up at Staten Island. On Shore Leave we would take the Staten Island Ferry to south Manhattan (only 5 cents), then the subway to Times Square.

On shore in a bar in New York City

Left "Sinbad", a Tel like Jack who usually was next in rotation in the radio room after Jack. Sinbad was from Toronto. Centre, Bob Touvelle, from Guelph, a Signalman. Signalmen communicated with the fleet with flags and signal lights using semaphore. Jack on right. This whole photo is a fake, we were not in a bar at all !. We visited New York City and on the street a photographer offered to take our photo in front of a staged background and foreground.. That is why you see me with a bottle or two of liquor...

Someone told me I should visit a place – a lounge, or club or something called the Stage Door Canteen. It was on 44th St., just a couple doors off Broadway.

It didn't look exceptional from the outside – but inside Wow, it was more than beautiful. After a very attractive entrance, there was a long snack bar with about 12 stools along the right wall, a large dance floor surrounded by tables, a stage and bandstand and it was all beautiful. There were about a dozen very pretty hostesses. There were snacks and great meals. The Hostess would mingle and dance with the servicemen. Entertainment was provided by some of the biggest stars from Hollywood and from Broadway shows and musicals. Music was provided by some of the best known orchestras of the Big Band Era. And it was all for men in uniform and ALL FREE !!



It was a marvellous place where servicemen from the United States and all Allied countries could have a great time and forget about the war for a while.

Someone told me of a place on Broadway where servicemen were given free tickets to movies, stage shows, musicals, concerts, sports events, etc. - virtually any entertainment in the city. I found the place and stood in line for tickets. An American soldier in line behind me struck up a conversation and asked what tickets I was going to get. I pointed to a poster on the wall. I t old him I wanted to go to an Ice Capades Performance starring Sonja Henney at Madison Square Gardens.

The American said he was on his own and could we join up. We did – saw a good show, went to the top of the Empire State Building and saw a great view of New York at night. It was a great day and evening and I returned to the ship having spent about 20 cents.

The next day, I did a repeat – Stage Door Canteen for afternoon entertainment and dinner then a great performance at Radio City Music Hall. I blew another 20 cents. The Americans really knew how to treat servicemen well! There was a major Hollywood movie made of the Stage Door Canteen starring Katherine Hepbourn. Stage Door Canteen was a big hit on radio and juke boxes for a long time. Even now, the melodies often runs through my head and I still remember all the words today.

The Stage Door Canteen

Where could a GI enjoy the best big bands, dance with the ladies, and rub elbows with the likes of Marlene Dietrich? Only at the Stage Door Canteen.

The Stage Door Canteen was an entertainment venue for American and Allied servicemen that operated

in the Broadway theatre district of New York City throughout World War II. In addition to shows, the canteen offered off-duty military personnel opportunities to unwind in various ways, including dancing with hostesses and female entertainers, eating, and writing letters home. Food was provided free. Between 5 pm. and midnight daily, the canteen served 200 gallons of coffee, and 5,000 cigarettes were smoked.

Bing Crosby at the Stage Door Canteen in NYC

Run by a volunteer organization that called itself the American Theatre Wing, the canteen offered servicemen nights of dancing, entertainment, food and nonalcoholic drinks, and even opportunities to hobnob with celebrities. The American Theatre Wing, best known today for sponsoring Broadway's Tony Awards, traces its origins back to World War I, when playwright and director Rachel Crothers and six other theater women formed the Stage Women's War Relief in 1917. Recruiting members from all aspects of the theater community, the organization sold almost $7 million in war bonds, collected nearly 2 million articles of clothing for distribution, and provided entertainment for US troops.

After the Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919, the organization turned to helping veterans and civilians recover from the effects of the war. It eventually disbanded, but two years before the United States was drawn into World War II, the federal government asked Crothers to reactivate it. Under its new American Theatre Wing name, the organization first set to work raising money and supplies to aid British civilians caught in the war's crossfire. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Heater Wing refocused itself on the US home front. In early February 1942, the organization began

work on a recreation centre for servicemen in New York's Broadway theatre district. Now led by actresses Jane Cowl and Selena Royce, the organization remodelled the the previously unoccupied Little Club in the basement of the 44th Street Theater, which was loaned gratis by producer and theater owner Lee Shubert. Manhattan theater trade unions provided all necessary work free of charge.

At a recruiting event for canteen volunteers, Cowl told the 700 men and women who turned up that they would be expected to work for free for the duration of the war and would be obligated to provide a substitute if they had to miss a shift.

Connie Haines, Maxie Rosenbloom, Ben Lyon, Morton Downey and Joan Blondell waiting to begin a radio broadcast from the Stage Door Canteen (1943)

The Stage Door Canteen opened on March 2nd, 1942. It was open 7 nights a week, from 6 pm. to midnight. The official estimate of attendance on the canteen's opening night was 1,250, with 200 "actresses of varying importance" as hostesses and 75 "'name' actors" as busboys. The Canteen could fit 500 people at a time, but even that wasn't enough to match its popularity. A ticket system had to be introduced so people could come in shifts, turning over 2,000 servicemen a night. "Probably nobody knows how many service men poured in for the free supper club that has opened under the auspices of the American Theatre Wing," wrote the New York Times, "for at 10:30 more were coming in and only a few were going out." Tallulah Bankhead performed on opening night, leading the entire house in a congo line. Later years would find Helen Hayes greeting men at the door, Katherine Hepburn fixing sandwiches, and Bettie Davis pouring coffee. To supplement the stars, 600 women acted as hostesses, doling out pie and dancing the jitterbug with servicemen. Their uniforms were red-white-and-blue

aprons with a pair of sterling silver wings pinned on the strap; appropriately, American Theatre wings.

The Canteen may have been staffed by the toast of Broadway, but it was the soldiers who were to be treated like stars. “These men are going to the Philippines. They are going to the Burma Road,” said actress and Canteen director Jane Cowl. “Nothing is too good for them.” That philosophy applied to each and every visitor. Privates were given just as much attention as generals, the soldiers wounded in action, covered in scars and burns, greeted as warmly as the fresh-faced recruits.

One of the many praiseworthy qualities of the canteens was their egalitarian credo. There was to be no discrimination against African-American or Latino soldiers. During the interview process, any hostess who expressed discomfort speaking to or dancing with black soldiers was immediately disqualified. They were open to all servicemen of Allied nations, and segregation had no place in them. A 1943 article in Theatre Arts magazine called the New York canteen “one of the few democratic institutions in existence anywhere: English soldiers, sailors and RAF [Royal Air Force] men dance beside, mingle and eat with Chinese airmen, Americans from every branch of the service, including Negroes and Indians, Canadians, Australians; South Africans, Dutch and French sailors…occasionally Russians: all are a part of the Stage Door Canteen.” The mix of races and nationalities did cause tension on a few occasions. It was harder to control the racism of white soldiers, but even then, the Canteen knew how to keep the peace. If any trouble started, the band was to strike up “The Star-Spangled Banner,” at which point every man in uniform would instinctively snap to attention.

Bette Davis at the Stage Door Canteen

The canteen was an instant success, and that success continued. Seven nights a week, the building pulsed with hordes of servicemen and young women dancing to the sounds of the most famous bands in the country. Stars abounded. Actress Helen Hayes served sandwiches while actors Alfred Lunt and Sam Jaffe cleared away the plates. Workers coped with the facility's limited size by allowing servicemen to enter in shifts. The system made it possible for more than 2,000 uniformed personnel to enter the club a night

A young actress named Lauren Bacall volunteered on Monday nights. "There was fierce jitterbugging," she wrote. "Many a time I found myself in the middle of a circle…being whirled and twirled by one guy, then passed on to another, non-stop, until I thought I would drop…. It wasn't much to do for the war effort, but it was something.

Though the canteen served food to the servicemen free of charge, someone had to pay for it. New Yorkers responded generously to appeals for aid. Radio station WMCA asked members of its studio audiences to bring in non-perishable goods. Shubert donated his Imperial Theatre for two benefit matinee performances, and songwriter Irving Berlin contributed all profits from his homage hit "I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen."

Birthday Party for a Sailor

The popularity of New York's Stage Door Canteen prompted the American Theatre Wing to establish similar facilities in other cities. Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and San Francisco each got its own canteen. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, called "the patron saint of the Wing" by organization board member and theater producer Brock Pemberton, helped establish a Washington, DC, branch in October 1942. Canteens were opened in London and Paris in the closing months of the war. But the

only canteen to rival the original's fame was the one in Los Angeles, thanks to its proximity to the country's biggest stars. Actor John Garfield and actress Bette Davis, both of whom had worked stints at the New York canteen, became the driving force behind its Hollywood counterpart. Instead of theater people, movie stars and crew members did the work.

The original Stage Door Canteen inspired a CBS Radio series (1942–45) and a 1943 film. The film was made by RKO Pathe Studios, using a replica of the New York venue on the studio's Culver City, California, site. Katharine Hepburn and Cheryl Walker appear in Stage Door Canteen, a 1943 American World War II film with some musical numbers and other entertainment interspersed with dramatic scenes by a largely unknown cast. The film was produced by Sol Lesser's Principal Artists Productions and directed by Frank Borzage. The film features many celebrity cameo appearances but primarily celebrates the work of the Stage Door Canteen, created in New York City as a recreational center for both American and Allied servicemen on leave to socialize with, be entertained or served by Broadway celebrities. Six bands are featured. The score and the original song, "We Mustn't Say Goodbye", were nominated for Academy Awards.

Movie Poster

Another film, This Is the Army (1943) and the Broadway play from which it was adapted include a scene set at the Stage Door Canteen. During that scene, Earl Oxford sang the song "I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen" in both versions. The song "speaks of the fleeting love that many of the men felt when they had to leave the canteen, never to see these beautiful women again." The most popular recorded version of the song was made by Sammy Kaye and his orchestra, with Don Cornell singing. It reached No. 2 on the Billboard chart.

As the war dragged on, the popularity of the canteens never wavered. On Valentine's Day 1944, the original canteen welcomed its 2 millionth guest (with a prize, a pair of tickets to the new musical Oklahoma). The New York Times reported that sandwiches served during the canteen's first two years, "if placed from end to end would stretch from here to Berlin and back if anyone wanted to feed the enemy." (Doughnuts were the only food the men seemed to tire of, and milk was their preferred

beverage.) New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia called the canteen “a great institution of which the city is very proud.” Thank-you letters from servicemen poured in from every corner of the globe.

The canteens managed to adapt to meet changing needs at different stages of the war. As military hospitals filled up with wounded servicemen, nurses took recovering patients to the canteens for nights out. Separate areas were set aside for these veterans. After the war ended, the American Theatre Wing began transforming itself to meet new demands. All the canteens had closed by the end of 1945, and attention shifted to creating a recreation program for patients in Veterans Administration hospitals and a theater school for GIs returning home from overseas.

The Stage Door Canteens were then left to live on in memory and legend. And a fine memory it was. As singer Maxene Andrews put it, “The Canteens in Hollywood, New York, and all those other cities brought out the best in the people there….”

The US treated service members well. Even in St. John's Newfoundland, Jack recalls, “*The best place to go was the American Service Canteen.*

War Ends

*On the 6 June 1945, I was on duty at the radios when THE message came, it was in PL (Plain Language), it was addressed "**To all ships at sea**." and said "**Hostilities in Europe have ended. Germany has surrendered. All ships proceed immediately to the nearest Allied port and await further orders.**" There was no wild celebration on the Wet Ass just quiet sense of relief that it was over and we had survived. We had a double tot of rum that day and a few back slaps, that was all.*

Several days later I said goodbye to the Wetaskiwin in Sydney, Nova Scotia Harbour. She left to sail to Sorel, Quebec for de-commissioning. In 1946, the good olde "Wet Ass Queen" was sold to the Venezuelan navy and renamed the Victoria. Her career ended in 1962 when she was decommissioned for the last time.

HMCS Wetaskiwin had served us faithfully and well, with grace and dependably, she never broke down or let us down despite the most adverse conditions. So, I bid her a fond farewell and was pleased that she would continue after the war.

As Victoria, still a proud and effective ship.

Convoys Escorted by HMCS Wetaskiwin

During my time aboard the Wetaskiwin, we provided escort for convoys, one of which was the largest of the war. - 166 ships. What follows are all the recorded convoys that the Wetaskiwin escorted. *, the number of ships in each convoy and the high percent of success in avoiding the loss of ships.*

The best reference for WWII convoys is http://www.convoyweb.org.uk/hague/index.html prepared by retired veteran Andrew Hague. 28,156 convoys searched on October 23, 2020. and 71 convoys found containing WETASKIWIN. These are listed as follows by convoy grouping**with the ones that Jack**

Armstrong participated in highlighted. It appears for most convoys, the escort ships, such as the Wetaskiwin, did not accompany the convoy for the whole trip but typically halfway or a portion of the trip. So a reference such as “Halifax to Liverpool” would be the “convoy trip” but a specific escort ship may have provided protection from Halifax to Newfoundland or Halifax to Iceland and at that point another escort vessel would have taken over. In some cases the specific portion of the convoy trip that the Wetaskiwin provided escort is indicated but the majority are not specific.

Wetaskiwin participated in several convoy escort groups but mostly C3 and C5.The “C” stood for Canadian.

Escort Group C-3,: consisting of Canadian River-class destroyers Saguenay and Skeena with Flower-class corvettes Wetaskiwin, Sackville, Galt and Camrose, participated in the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF). This was the organization of anti-submarine escorts for World War II trade convoys between Canada and Newfoundland [then not part of Canada], and the British Isles Flower-class corvette Camrose was replaced by corvette Agassiz. The Corvette Sackville is the only surviving Canadian corvette and is now preserved at Halifax harbour.

Escort Group C5 (EG C5) was formed after destroyer Saguenay suffered server damage during a collision when her depth charges blew off her stern. HNCS Wetaskiwin joined a new escort group C5 within the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) consisting of River-class frigate **Dunver and corvettes Dauphin, Wetaskiwin, New Westminster, Hespeler, Algoma, and Long Branch. Jack Armstrong's service was mostly within C5.**

Four corvettes leaving Halifax for convoy escort

Convoys were divided into fast convoys for merchant ships that could travel quickly across the Atlantic and consequently less time exposed to enemy u-boats,(these fast convoys were given ON and HX designations) between North America and Iceland under the Argentina Agreement. The Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF) was restricted to escorting slow convoys (SC and ONS designations).

Your query found 2 OB convoys containing "WETASKIWIN".
WETASKIWIN in Convoy OB.336 (Jun 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy OB.347 (Jul 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)

Your query found 26 ON convoys containing "WETASKIWIN". (ON were fast convoys.}

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.16 (Sep 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.27 (Oct 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.40 (Nov 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.52 (Dec 1941: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.104 (Jun 1942: Liverpool - Boston)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.115 (Jul 1942: Liverpool – Boston)
On July 31, 1942, HMCS Skeena and HMCS Wetaskiwin of convoy escort group C3 were credited with destroying German U-Boat U588 with depth charges while defending the ships of convoy ON 115
Escort Group C-3: Canadian River-class destroyers Saguenay and Skeena with Flower-class corvettes ***Wetaskiwin****, Sackville, Galt and Camrose*

Commodore LW Murray, on August 4, 1942, congratulating the Ships Companies of HMCS SKEENA and HMCS WETASKIWIN for sinking the German submarine U-588 on 31 July.

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.121 (Aug 1942: Liverpool - Dispersed)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.131 (Sep 1942: Liverpool - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.141 (Oct 1942: Liverpool - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.152 (Dec 1942: Liverpool - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.182 (May 1943: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 182 MOEF group C5 7–16 May 1943 - 56 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.188 (Jun 1943: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 188 MOEF group C5 11–20 June 1943 - 56 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.193 (Jul 1943: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 193 MOEF group C5 17–25 July 1943[16] 80 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.199 (Aug 1943: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 199 MOEF group C5 27 August – 4 September 1943 - 59 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.205 (Oct 1943: Liverpool – NYC)

ON 205 MOEF group C5 6–16 October 1943 66 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.211 (Nov 1943: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 211 MOEF group C5 14–24 November 1943 - 49 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.243 (July 1944: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 243 MOEF group C5 4–12 July 1944 - 89 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.248S (Aug 1944: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 248S MOEF group C5 11–21 August 1944 - 102 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.255 (Sep 1944: Liverpool – NYC)
ON 255 MOEF group C5 23 September – 4 October 1944 - 84 ships escorted without loss from Northern Ireland to Newfoundland
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.258 (Oct 1944: Southend - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.266 (Nov 1944: Southend - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.278 (Jan 1945: Southend - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.280 (Jan 1945: Southend - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.286 (Feb 1945: Liverpool - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.290 (Mar 1945: Southend - NYC)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ON.296 (Apr 1945: Liverpool – NYC)

Your query found 3 ONS convoys containing "WETASKIWIN". ONS were slow convoys
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.38 (Dec 1944: Liverpool - Halifax)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.42 (Feb 1945: Liverpool - Halifax)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.50 (May 1945: Liverpool - Halifax)

Your query found 24 HX convoys containing "WETASKIWIN". The HX convoys were considered fast convoys.
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.125A (May 1941: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.127 (May 1941: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.130 (Jun 1941: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.136 (Jun 1941: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.147 (Aug 1941: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.191 (May 1942: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.202 (Aug 1942: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.210 (Oct 1942: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.221 (Dec 1942: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.233 (Apr 1943: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.240 (May 1943: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 240 MOEF group C5 25 May – 3 June 1943 - 56 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.245 (Jun 1943: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 245 MOEF group C5 29 June – 5 July 1943[14] 84 ships escorted without loss from

Newfoundland to Northern Ireland.

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.250 (Jul 1943: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 250 MOEF group C5 5–11 August 1943 - 75 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland.

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.256 (Sep 1943: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 256 MOEF group C5 15–21 September 1943[14] 59 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.262 (Oct 1943: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 262 MOEF group C5 24 October – 2 November 1943[14] 59 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.295 (June 1944: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 295 MOEF group C5 15–23 June 1944 - 80 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland.

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.300 (July 1944: NYC – Liverpool)
HX 300 MOEF group C5 24 July – 3 August 1944 - 166 ships escorted without loss from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland, - the largest convoy of the war.
The four warships from Halifax were detached when Mid-Ocean Escort Force group C5 River-class frigate Dunver and corvettes Dauphin, Wetaskiwin, New Westminster, Hespeler, Algoma, and Long Branch assumed responsibility for the convoy on 24 July

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.305 (Aug 1944: NYC – Liverpool) This convoy departed New York City on Aug. 25-1944 then to Halifax where it picked up more ships - Sailed Aug. 27 to Sydney Cape Breton - Sailed Aug. 28 consisting of 97 merchant ships & 27 escorts. (Source: Arnold Hague Database)
HX 305 MOEF group C5 The Wetaskiwin provided escort from Newfoundland to Northern Ireland (30 August – 9 September 1944); At 05.51 hours on 8 Sep 1944, U-482 fired a torpedo spread at convoy HX-305 north-northeast of Tory Island, north of Londonderry, Ireland and heard a detonation and sinking noises. The same happened after firing a Gnat at 05.59 hours. Apparently both torpedoes hit the British tanker Empire Heritage. (Master James Jamieson, OBE) The Empire Heritage was hit on the starboard side just abaft of the bridge and the stern. The ship settled by the stern and soon thereafter capsized before sinking. The master, 49 crew members, eight gunners, one convoy signalman, one army storekeeper and 52 passengers (DBS "Distressed British Seamen" ie. survivors of previous sinkings, men discharged from ships abroad ill etc. who were taking passage back to Britain.) were lost.

At 06.37 hours, the U-boat fired a Gnat at a stopped ship, which sank shortly after the hit. The stopped vessel was the rescue ship Pinto, which was rescuing the survivors of the torpedoed tanker when attacked. Rescue vessel Pinto was on her 5th voyage as rescue vessel, having started this voyage from Clyde with the westbound convoy ON 247 on Aug. 2-1944, to Halifax Aug. 13 - returning with Convoy HX 305 Aug. 27. Pinto picked up survivors from the torpedoed Empire Heritage, but as it turned out this was to be her first and final rescue, because Pinto was herself sunk by the same U-boat. Two crew members already picked up by the Pinto were lost when she was sunk. 25 crew members, three gunners, 20 passengers (DBS) and one signalman were picked up by HMS Northern Wave and landed at Londonderry. (Source: U-Boat.net**)**

WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.314 (Oct 1944: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.325 (Dec 1944: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.336 (Feb 1945: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.348 (Apr 1945: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.350 (Apr 1945: NYC - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy HX.354 (May 1945: NYC - Liverpool)

Your query found 1 BX convoy containing "WETASKIWIN".
WETASKIWIN in Convoy BX.140 (Jan 1945: Boston - Halifax)

Your query found 3 ONS convoys containing "WETASKIWIN". (ONS were slow convoys)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.38 (Dec 1944: Liverpool - Halifax)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.42 (Feb 1945: Liverpool - Halifax)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy ONS.50 (May 1945: Liverpool - Halifax)

Your query found 15 SC convoys containing "WETASKIWIN". (SC were slow convoys.)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.33 (Jun 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.36 (Jul 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.42 (Aug 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.48 (Oct 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.54 (Nov 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.60 (Dec 1941: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.90 (Jul 1942: Sydney CB - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.98 (Aug 1942: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.109 (Nov 1942: NYC - Liverpool) with Escort Group C3. Escort Group C-3:consisted of Canadian River-class destroyers Saguenay and Skeena with Flower-class corvettes Wetaskiwin, Sackville, Galt and Camrose**.** Convoy SC 109 lost one ship torpedoed by U-43 and Saguenay was irreparably damaged on the 15 November 1942 when Saguenay was rammed by the Panamanian freighter Azra off Cape Race, Newfoundland. The impact of the collision set off Saguenay's depth charges, which blew off her stern. .[Town-class destroyer Burnham replaced Saguenay. Flower-class corvettes Wetaskiwin, Sackville, Galt and Agassiz were replaced by corvettes Bittersweet, Eyebright, La Malbaie and Mayflower.] Hereafter HMCS Wetaskiwin is found with Escort Group C5.

WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.161 (Nov 1944: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.163 (Dec 1944: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.165 (Jan 1945: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.167 (Feb 1945: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.170 (Mar 1945: Halifax - Liverpool)
WETASKIWIN in Convoy SC.176 (May 1945: Halifax - Liverpool)

Corvettes were convoy protectors, but also U-boat hunters when the opportunity arose. In fact, 20 corvettes earned solo or shared credit in 17 of the RCN’s 33 U-boat kills, the Wetaskiwin being one of these. On the downside, 10 of the 24 Canadian warships sunk were corvettes, seven lost by torpedoing, and one each by aircraft, collision and mine. By theatre, Canada’s corvettes losses were: Atlantic, 3—Levis, Windflower, Spikenard; English Channel, 3—Regina, Alberni, Trentonian; Gulf of St. Lawrence, 2—Charlottetown, Shawinigan; and Mediterranean, 2—Louisburg and Weyburn.

Queen of Hearts Ends Her Sea Duties

OTTAWA, July [illegible] The Queen of Hearts has made [illegible] voyage.

The Queen is the H.M.C.S. Wetaskiwin, first of the old type corvettes built at Vancouver and with her sisters of the Royal Canadian Navy went through more than four years of grim slogging in the battle of the Atlantic.

Now that the Atlantic convoy lanes at last are safe she and some of her sisters are no longer needed there. They are at rest at the Naval "Scrapyard" at Sorel, Que., awaiting an unknown fate. The war assets corporation will dispose of them.

In telling the story of the Queen of Hearts today, the Navy also told of Steward Jimmy Hill of Saskatoon who was with her through her entire sea career from the time of her commissioning in Vancouver to her decommissioning at Sorel, except for a six month period.

And the Navy noted that Jimmy as well as the Queen probably has made his last voyage. He's 44 now and is eager to get back to Saskatoon where his wife and 13-year-old son await him.

But whether he stays in the Navy or not, Jimmy Hill will always have his memories of the Wetaskiwin which [illegible] her Nickname Queen of Hearts [illegible] om her badge, painted on her by Sig. R. B. (Bernie) Forbes of Montreal. It was in the shape of a playing card with hearts in each corner, and a glamorous young Queen in the middle.

Hill remembered one night on the Iceland convoy run when a wolf-pack attacked the convoy. A British corvette and destroyer, and an American destroyer and 17 freighters went down that night, but the Queen came through.

"One torpedo went across our bow", Steward Hill recalls. "We stopped to pick up survivors and saved 42 men but Jerry sent another torpedo swishing past us. The old man sure got out of there in a hurry."

The veteran Steward regrets he was on shore leave for the highlight of the Queen's career when she shared destruction of a U-boat with H.M.C.S. Skeena.

The Queen's first Captain was Lt.-Cmdr. Guy S. Windeyer, an Australian making his home in Duncan, B.C. He was in command from the Queen's commission until 1942 when he took over the destroyer H.M.C.S. St. Laurent and was succeeded by Lt.-Cmdr. J. R. Kidston of Vernon, B.C.

Post War

I spent the next few months in Sydney, Nova Scotia removing electronic gear from ships and having it packed and shipped off to storage. Then I was drafted aboard another ship, the HMCS Alberton", an ocean tug, about the size of a mine sweeper for about six months.

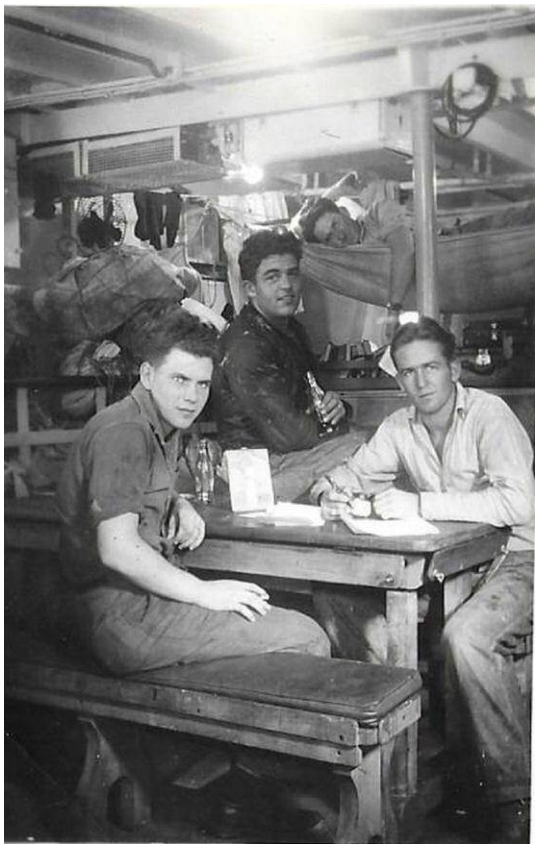
HMCS Alberton

The tug H.M.C.S. Alberton was a Norton Class tug built in 1944 by Montreal Dry Docks Ltd. at Montreal QC. She was 104.5' x 26.7' x 11.2' steel hulled . She was employed by the RCN as a general duty tug at Sydney NS. In 1946 she was sold and continued to be used ending her life in Lisbon, Portugal in 2008. (Source: The Nauticapedia, Cossey, Leigh (2018) The Tug H.M.C.S. Alberton. Nauticapedia.ca 2018. http://nauticapedia.ca/Gallery/Alberton.php)

We spent about 6 months removing mines and other explosives and steel nets that had been installed around the harbour entrances and other strategic locations to protect against German u-boat attacks. An easy job after corvette duty, radio operation was my only job and I wasn't that busy, so I had much more of a social life with the crew on the Alberton. The extra time also meant more photos.

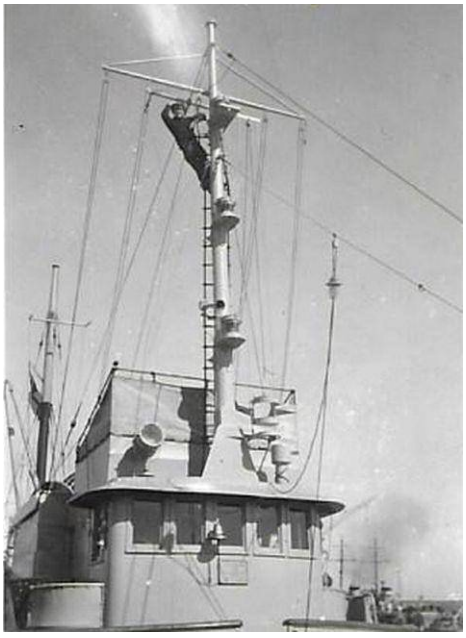
Crew on Alberton

Jack Armstrong - 3rd row, far right



Mess in Alberton – Jack in Hammock, Frank center

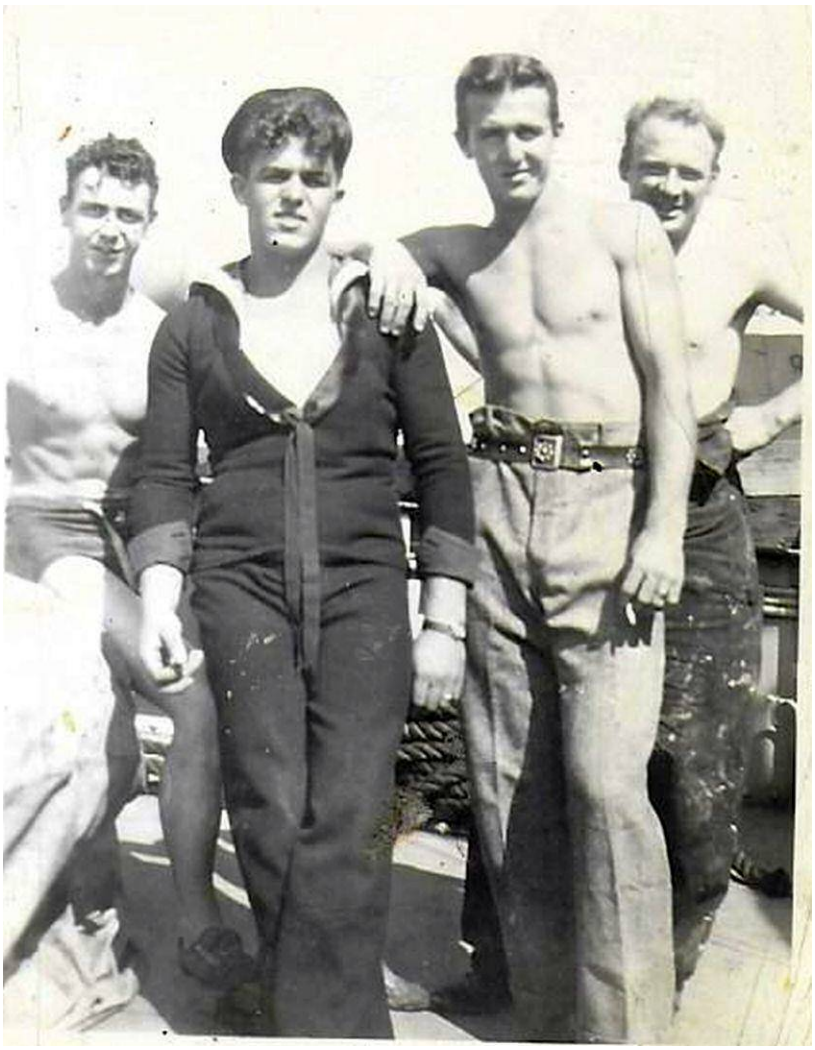
Jack in front center
The fellow on the right in both photos is Woody. I was his best man at his wedding in Toronto. It was a Syrian wedding that went on for days ! Dinny in hammock



Man up mast

Jack, center, behind pole wearing a German officer's uniform that he picked up somewhere.

Formal photo of Crew of Alberton



Jack, far left, with Frank, Woody & Dinny of the Alberton

Then suddenly it was over in the spring of 1946 I was sent to Montreal where I was given my discharge papers and a train ticket to Ottawa, to pick up the threads of my civilian life. One of the first challenges of this new life was learning to adapt to a regular bed with a pillow after 3 years in a hammock!

Epilogue

About 15 years after the war ended, I was living in Montreal and working in Bell Canada's Engineering Department. I was responsible for the design and implementation of a new communications network spanning all of Canada – from St. John's NFLD to Victoria B.C. The design included many new concepts and new equipment designs. I made many trips across the country to meet with the Engineering Departments of all trans Canada companies involved to explain designs to ensure that all sections of the system were designed to the same exacting standard, and to answer questions.

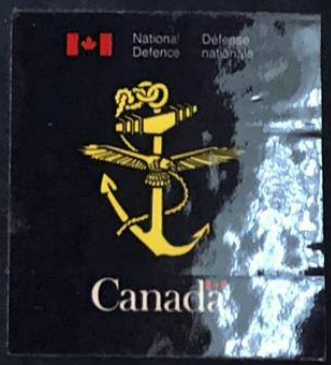
On one of my trips I was accompanied by a Bell Engineer from our Toronto office. His name was Hans, an immigrant from Germany, a fine engineer and a really nice person to work with. We spent a good deal of time together during a week of travel and we became friends. During our talks I learned that Hans had been in the German navy during the war. He had served on submarines in the north Atlantic attacking Allied convoys. We realized that Hans and I, now good friends, might have been involved in killing one another. I felt grateful that both Hans and I survived but sadness for the millions that did not. This brought home to me what I already knew – that war is a senseless way to resolve disputes between nations. Unfortunately, with madmen like Hitler, there is sometimes no choice.

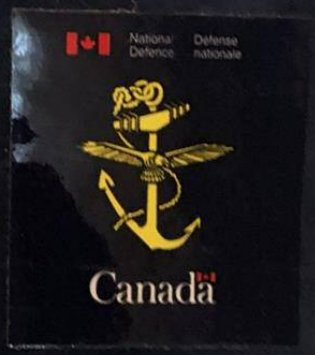
HMCS Wetaskiwin (1943-1944)


ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY
CANADA
CANADA
1943
1946

H.M.C.S.

CANADA



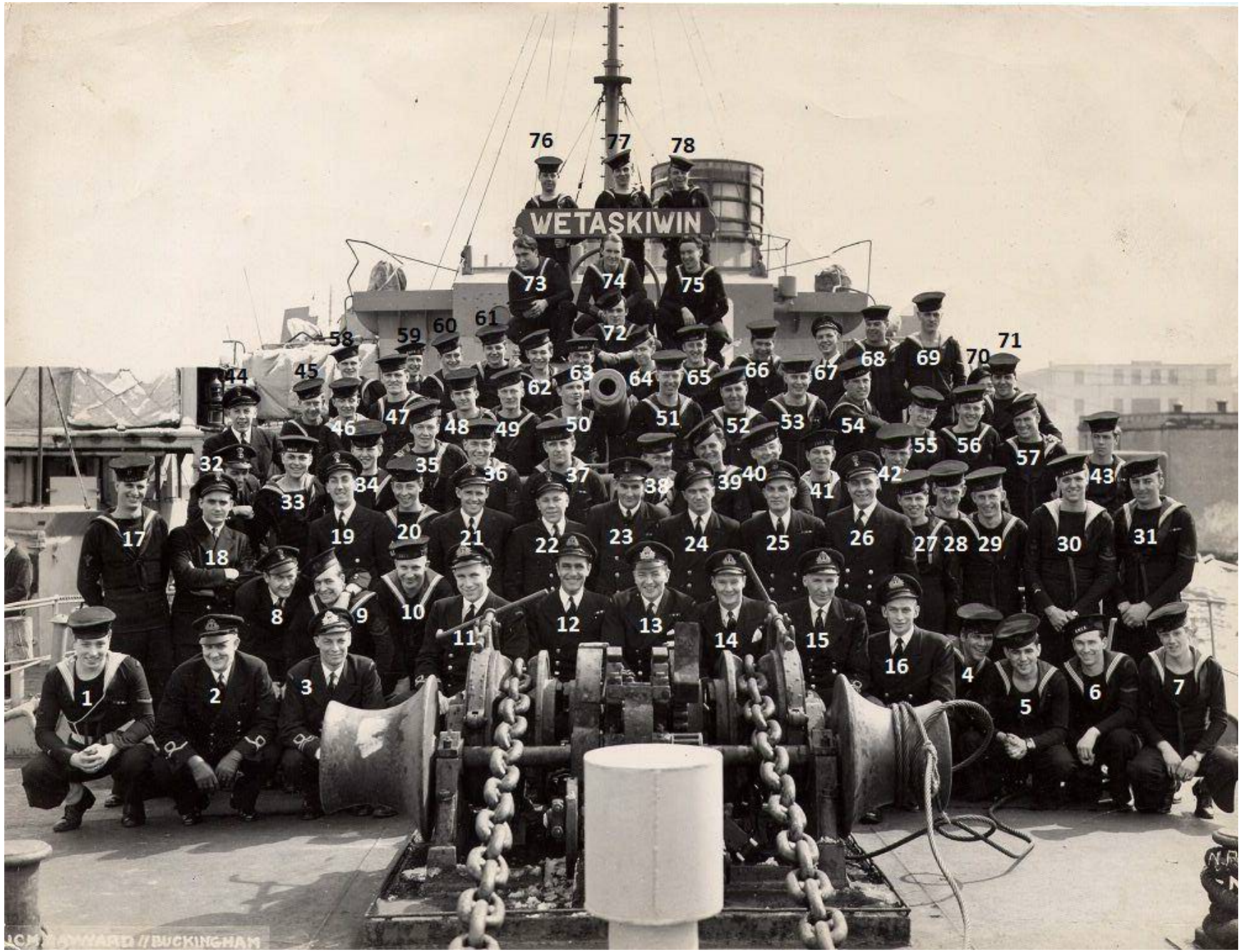


H.M.C.S. WETASKIWIN

Jack Armstrong is just to the right of the cannon and above it with his hat on a tilt.
Photo taken in Halifax after March 1944 when HMCS WETASKIWIN returned from refit in Galveston, Texas.

Here is the full photo with all of the crew.

Photo taken in Halifax after March 1944 when HMCS WETASKIWIN returned from refit in Galveston, Texas.
Photo taken in Halifax after March 1944 when HMCS WETASKIWIN returned from refit in Galveston, Texas.


WETASKIWIN
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(7) Bernard (Bernie) Forbes
(38) Vanier, Edmund Albert
(48) Wright, Walter Faraday
(64) Armstrong, Jack, Tel
(75) Curts, Alexander

Addendum

While researching the HMCS Wetaskiwin, I came across a Wetaskiwin pin offered on E-Bay. It had been sold but I contacted the seller and asked him if he had any others. He indicated he had not but he could try at the Wetaskiwin Legion next time he passed through that way. Facebook has a HMCS Wetaskiwin site and a link to the Legion so I contacted the Wetaskiwin legion and asked if they might have one to sell. They promptly replied that they would check. In a few days they replied: “Hi Bob, we were able to find the lapel pin you were looking for. A members father was a long time legion member and a pin collector. He had two of your pins and is going to donate one to us to pass along to you for your dad. “
I replied in part: “My father-in-law will be ecstatic to receive this for Christmas. . We have been putting together his history aboard the HMCS Wetaskiwin for his kids, so getting this pin will be a highlight !! The Legion spokesperson responded: “We would love to send the pin on to you. No charge. Only thing we would like is a pic of your dad with the pin and a copy of his history aboard the ship once you have it all together. Also if it’s ok to post his pic and story on our legion FB page.” I replied: “Certainly, We will speak to him for his permission on Christmas Day when we give him the pin.”

Here is a photo of the pin with an engraving of the HMCS Wetaskiwin, K175 after it's 1944 refit and also an engraving of the Legion Branch #86 logo.