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Canadian minesweepers cleared Invasion Path
"Led Everything Else"

An East Coast Canadian Port- August 14, 1944-(Special)

The hazardous and valuable role played by Canadian minesweepers and their Canadian sailors clearing paths across the English Channel for the Allied invasion armada on the night preceeding and weeks following "D" Day was revealed here on the return home of several crew members from three of the participating ships

Their sweepers H.M.C.S. CANSO BAYFIELD and THUNDER were with the more than 100 Canadian naval vessels which took part in escorting the invasion forces to France

"Without them the minesweeping plan could not have been carried through", said a message of congratulations to the Canadian sweepers from naval authorities after the invasion. "The splendid spirit and endurance shown by all officers and men of the Canadian minesweepers was in accordance with the highest traditions of the Royal Canadian Navy.

Not a single life was lost aboard the Canadian ships, although their job carried them into heavily-mined waters under noses of enemy shorebatteries only a mile away on the French coast. Many lives of Allied soldiers and air men were saved and the sweepers accounted for a number of enemy aircraft shot down by their Oerlikon guns.

CLEARED 100 MILES

In 12 hours of pre-dusk to dawn patrol off the French coast the Canadians cleared 100 miles of sea lanes for the invasion ships to safely carry their loads of fighting men to the beachheads .

One all-Canadian flotilla of sweepers destroyed 78 mines alone in that pre-"D" Day sweep more than 400 in the 50 days of continuous duty off the French coast.

Crew members of the CANSO brought along a tire from a "Junkers 88" dive bomber shot down by the sweepers Oerlikons, sailors from the Bayfield brought home an oxygen tank from another enemy dive bomber brought down alongside their ship.

"The minesweepers led everything else in the invasion to sweep the lanes" recounted Commander Herman D. MacKay, R.C.N.R. of Halifax and Westville who commanded H.M.C.S. Thunder senior ship of the Canadian minesweepers forces overseas, Chief Skipper of his ship is A.W. Moore of Horton, Nova Scotia.

CANADIAN MINESWEEPERS

"Not one of the Canadian ships was hit in the entire operations, some of the American and British were though" he said.

While shells screamed over their heads in a dual between British, United States and Free French warships and German shore guns, the minesweepers plodded on, cutting hundreds of mines away from the approaches to Hitler's Europe. Overhead Allied Planes shuttled back and forth to give them protection and to pound the French shore batteries in preparation for the initial assault.

H.M.C.S. Bayfield, in command of Lieut. Stanley Pierce R.C.N.R. of Verdun, Quebec and which had been previously credited with picking Canadian airmen forced down at sea 300 miles off Newfoundland and attempting to ram a U-Boat on the foggy Atlantic was assigned to laying "danbuoys" to mark the cleared road to France. It however, shared equally in the dangers that faced the slow steaming sweepers.

HEAVY AIR ATTACK

Officers from the BAYFIELD, Lieut. Fred Cunningham, Hamilton, Ontario, Lieut. Murray Maynard, Toronto and Lieut. Ben Berube of Quebec City, told of heavy enemy air attack in the early days of the invasion. Assigned to a United States task force, their ship had to stand ready to take invasion forces in their sector off the beach in event the American soldiers were unable to scale a high cliff topped with a concentration of enemy guns. Allied warships cleared these out for them, however and the Americans went over the cliff on the second day.

The Bayfield's navigation officer, Lieut. Gerald Frances Burgess, R.C.N.R. of Rexton, N.B. and Halifax said the "Canadians did a very fine job.

"The minefields were very much heavier than we expected them to be" he said.

Lieut. Burgess told how his ship rescued survivors from a United States landing craft which had been sunk by the enemy.

"Even after we got lanes cleared for the invasion forces he recounted, "we had to stay on the job day and night. The Germans started dropping more mines by planes.

The Bayfield was with an all-Canadian minesweeping flotilla. Crew members later wrote a lyric about the flotilla's role and dubbed the group the "Maple Leaf Flotilla" because it was the only - all Canadian force with the Allied minesweepers.

H.M.C.S. CANSO in command of Lieut. John Kincaid, R.C.N.R. of Victoria and Chester, Nova Scotia was with an Allied mine-sweeping force in a sector leading to Cherbourg and encountered heavy and steadily increasing enemy air attack until the sixth day when the United States forces which landed there had a landing strip built.

CANADIAN MINESWEEPERS

Its crew members termed the Allied air coverage given the invasion fleet as the greatest and most smoothly operating force you could imagine, it soon drove the enemy from the skies over the channel and beachhead they said.

SWEPT ROYAL COARSE

The CANSO was later given the honour of being the only Canadian minesweeper in the flotilla which "swept" a course for King George's voyage to Normandy.

H.M.C.S. THUNDER which commander McKay has captained since her commissioning later was assigned to a flotilla which assisted in the siege of Cherbourg to replace a United States sweeper which had been sunk with a mine. The Thunder also has to its credit the rescue of a 5,000 ton collier disabled at sea. The Thunder took the big vessel in tow and brought her some 250 miles to safety. Of the three sweepers the Bayfield has most action. She went through the invasion with a damaged bow suffered in the pre-vasion sweep. She had been previously badly crippled when rammed by an Allied merchant ship during a fog. It convoyed millions of tons of valuable war cargo and supplies to and from Allied ports rescued close to 500 survivors of enemy action at sea, towed several crippled merchant ships to safety and played major roles in emergency calls for aid and minesweeping operations during her 55,000 miles of sea travel.

When the enemy tried to seal the entrance to Halifax harbor in June 1943, by sowing mines, the Bayfield was one of the ships engaged in sweeping up the mines, getting credit for removing two and assisting in the destruction of three others. She also took part in similar operations at another Allied port, sweeping a couple more and registering three assists.

Home returning Canadians also included Able Seaman William Lockett, Toronto, Able Seaman Lloyd Cooper, Winnipeg, Stoker William Erickson, Telegraphist D.B. Humphrey and Able Seaman Frank Penston, Winnipeg, Able Seaman Dennis O'Donnell, Toronto Lieut. Donald Purdy, Ottawa, Lieut. Murray Johnston, Toronto

P.S. - This Toronto Evening Telegram is still Fred's possession and was saved for him by his mother during the war.

Frederick C. Osmond was a Stoker on the H.M.C.S. CANSO and swept the beaches on D Day