

LOSS OF HMCS FRASER (RIVER CLASS DESTROYER)

Time of Collision: 2220 BST (2220Z) 25 June 1940
Position: 45° 43' N., 01° 32' W., 15 miles due west of
Pt. de la Coubre Light, at the mouth of the
Gironde River.
Complement: 172 (9 officers and 163 men)
Dead or Missing: 47 men *
Survivors: 125 (9 officers and 116 men)
Commanding Officer: Commander W.B. Creery, RCN (Survivor)

HMCS FRASER was one of the six original River Class destroyers with which Canada entered the war. Formerly known as HMS CRESCENT, the 1,355 ton vessel was purchased from the British Government in 1937. On August 31, 1939, FRASER left Vancouver in company with HMCS ST. LAURENT and proceeded with all dispatch via the Panama Canal for the Nova Scotian coast. In the tense months which followed, FRASER was engaged in patrol and escort duties on the East Coast and in the Caribbean.

On May 23, 1940, the Canadian Government received an urgent message from the United Kingdom asking for all available RCN destroyers to assist in the defence of England against possible invasion. The following day three destroyers (HMC Ships SKEENA, RESTIGOUCHE and ST. LAURENT) sailed from Halifax. FRASER, having been dispatched to C. in C. America and West Indies for local defence in Bermuda, was re-routed to England and sailed independently on May 27.

This marked the opening of a new phase in the history of the Royal Canadian Navy. The RCN had been in existence since 1910 and the Canadian Army was serving its third war abroad, but this slender armada of Canadian ships was the first force of Canadian-owned and -manned ships under Canadian Commanders to operate in an active war zone.

FRASER reached Devonport on June 3, just as the evacuation of Dunkirk was drawing to a close. Along with the other Canadian destroyers in U.K. waters, FRASER (S.O.) was placed under the operational control of C. in C. Western Approaches and was based on Plymouth.

No Canadian destroyers participated in Dunkirk operations for, although they arrived in England during the evacuation, they were immediately taken in hand to be fitted with anti-aircraft armament. FRASER's refit was the most extensive, lasting until June 11. Thereafter she became part of the great force engaged in fending off U-boats and E-boats and in salvaging "the melancholy remnants of defeat".

German infantry and armour were sweeping along the western coast of France, driving into the sea the broken fragments of British and French divisions. Here and there, at isolated bays and harbours, a few battalions of soldiers might be

* This figure does not include 19 R.N. ratings who formed part of the party being evacuated from France by FRASER.

rescued by ship; a few hundreds out of the hundreds of thousands of refugees might be saved; a few parties of engineers might be landed to conduct important demolitions. In all of this vital work the Canadian destroyers joined with many British ships.

On June 21, the day of France's humiliation at Compiègne, FRASER was dispatched to St. Jean de Luz, on the Biscay coast near the Franco-Spanish border. The little town was one of the last remaining exit points for refugees, and thousands of Polish troops who had fought with the French Army were also retreating there for evacuation.

The Canadian destroyer arrived off St. Jean de Luz on the evening of the 22nd. Throughout the night she carried on anti-submarine patrols and at dawn was ordered northward to rendezvous with the British Cruiser HMS GALATEA. From GALATEA she received orders to proceed at full speed for Arachon, where she was to embark the British Ambassador to France and his party. As FRASER was approaching Arachon at 1030Z on the 23rd she was hailed by a French sardine boat bearing not only the British Ambassador to France but also the Canadian and South African Ministers and their staffs. FRASER embarked the party and returned to St. Jean de Luz where her passengers were transferred to GALATEA.

In the 48 hours preceeding 1200Z June 25, sixteen thousand soldiers and thousands of civilians made their escape from the German forces advancing from the north towards the port of St. Jean de Luz. FRASER had just evacuated her quota of refugees¹ when, at 1250Z, a field gun appeared threateningly on the brow of the hill overlooking the harbour.

In company with the British Cruiser HMS CALCUTTA (Acting Vice-Admiral A.T.B. Curteis, Flag Officer Commanding Second Cruiser Squadron, borne aboard) and HMCS RESTIGOUCHE, FRASER shaped course for Plymouth.

By 2143Z the ships, just visible to each other in the gathering darkness, were proceeding at 25 knots on course 006°. At 2202Z speed was reduced to 20 knots and the Flag Officer, C.S. 2, ordered a turn together to 250°. This manoeuvre put FRASER one and a half miles 34 degrees on CALCUTTA's starboard bow, with RESTIGOUCHE similarly disposed on the cruiser's port quarter. At 2214Z the order was given to "form single line ahead in sequence of fleet numbers". Speed was further reduced to 14 knots. RESTIGOUCHE increased speed to close but kept about seven cables astern of CALCUTTA in order to allow FRASER to take up station between herself and the cruiser.

Aboard FRASER, the Commanding Officer instructed his Officer of the Watch (O.O.W.) to bring the ship round to port. It was his intention to pass down CALCUTTA's starboard side and take up position astern. CALCUTTA, observing FRASER's initial turn to port, assumed that the destroyer intended to cross her bows and pass down her port side. Thus, the elements of the misunderstanding, which was to bring the ships into collision minutes later, were set.

Had full port wheel been used at once, FRASER could quite conceivably have executed her turn short of CALCUTTA.

* 5 R.N. Officers; 33 R.N. Ratings; 1 British Army Officer; 1 French Naval Officer; 4 Polish Seamen.

As it happened, FRASER's O.O.W. gave the wheel order "Port 10". The C.O. who was on the bridge at the time realized that the officer did not have sufficient helm on, but, as the situation at that point did not appear serious, "decided to let him make a bad turn to teach him a lesson". Half a minute later the C.O. told his officer to increase to 20 knots and get the manoeuvre over. Owing to the darkness and his own exhausted condition (he had not had one complete night's rest in the last nine) the C.O. had been slow to appreciate the growing danger of the situation and his order to increase speed could serve only to widen the arc of FRASER's turning circle. A minute later at 2218Z when the full import of the ship's bearing became apparent, the C.O. took over, ordering "Port 20" followed immediately by "Hard a port". CALCUTTA meanwhile, still believing (wrongly) that FRASER's intentions were to cross her bows, estimated that if she held her course FRASER would pass dangerously close down her port side, consequently she put her wheel to starboard in a misguided effort to facilitate FRASER's manoeuvre. The die was cast. From this point nothing that either commanding officer might do would more than lessen the inevitable collision. FRASER's C.O. realizing at this point that his ship could not turn short of CALCUTTA decided to try and cross her bow, giving the order "Hard a starboard, sound one short blast". Thirty seconds later, when it was apparent that FRASER's swing could not be checked in time, and in order to avoid a head-on collision, he followed this order with "Hard a port, full speed astern both". The two ships were converging under helm at a combined speed of 34 knots and although both were put to "full astern" it was impossible to avert the impending disaster. At 2220Z CALCUTTA's stem struck FRASER on the starboard bow, abreast "B" gun, and as the ships continued to swing, the destroyer's bow broke off at the break of the forecastle. The bow drifted away carrying with it some thirty men.

CALCUTTA's bow jugged into FRASER's wheel-house and the fore part of the forebridge. FRASER's C.O. realizing that this precarious perch would not hold long, ordered everyone on the bridge to leap to CALCUTTA's forecastle.

RESTIGOUCHE, coming up from astern, hastened to the rescue of FRASER's survivors. By skilfully manoeuvring herself alongside FRASER's quarterdeck she was able to transfer sixty of the survivors directly to her own deck. Turning her attention next to the thirty men clinging to the starboard guard rails of the severed bow, RESTIGOUCHE closed to within 100 yards when the bows suddenly capsized hurling the surviving men into the oil-covered water. RESTIGOUCHE's carley floats and two whalers were lowered and went to their assistance. One of RESTIGOUCHE's men was lost during rescue operations. In addition, 47 men were lost from FRASER as well as 19 of the Royal Navy ratings being evacuated from France.

The Flag Officer, C.S.2, having decided that it would not be feasible to tow the after part of FRASER to port, ordered RESTIGOUCHE to sink it. A scuttling party was therefore sent on board. A final search for possible injured survivors was carried out; confidential books and \$1224.26 Public Money was recovered from the C.O.'s cabin. At 0120Z/26 when the scuttling party arrived back on board RESTIGOUCHE, FRASER was observed to be sinking steadily by the head, in approximate position 45°43'N 01°36'W, roughly 15 miles due west of Pt. de la Coubre light at the mouth of the Gironde River.