

Frigate Days – by Cullis Lancaster – Navigating Officer aboard HMCS Ribble

Following my days with Combined Operations at Normandy I went to join my ship which was still under construction in Blyth, in Northumberland. HMCS Ribble was one of ten frigates built by the Royal Navy which were to be manned by Canadian crews. Blyth is a small port, home of a ship breaking company and during wartime was a submarine base, HMS Elfin. I was there for about three weeks, checking the fitting out of my part of ship, the charts, navigation equipment, and the new advanced radar and sonar equipment we would be using.

There were no barracks for us to live in. All those waiting for ships to be completed had to find a room in local houses and get meals wherever possible. I found a room at the home of a coal miner and was able to get my meals at the submarine base. During that period I was drawing my greatest amount of pay. The normal payment for a Lieutenant, RCNVR, was \$6.00 per day. My completion of the Specialist Navigation Course earned me another 50 cents a day. Because we had to find our own living arrangements, the navy paid us “Lodging and Accommodation”, better known as “Lodge and Scrounge”. That amounted to six dollars a day. The base, HMS Elfin, was home to the crews operating the submarines in the North Sea. As they did not have space for a wardroom aboard the subs, the shore base was granted the permission to charge the crews using the mess duty free prices. A drink of gin cost one penny. Tea was served at 1600, usually cinnamon toast came with it.

The other features of Blyth were a cinema and the Palais, the local dance hall. It was used by all the sailors from the sub base, plus girls from the Auxiliary Territorial Service Anti-Aircraft Batteries, plus the crews standing by for the new ships, in addition to the ship yard workers. Like most British Dance Halls, it was always a busy place.

One remembrance from Blyth was the barber shop. I had to get a haircut so surrendered myself to the local barber. I sat in the barber’s chair and then a young boy, about thirteen, took the electric clippers and went around my head just as if he was using a bowl for a guide. When the boy was done, the barber took over and completed the job. Every body had the same style so it was not too noticeable.

During my stay in Blyth I took advantage of the submarine base to participate in a one day training exercise. I went out in an A Class submarine for a voyage in nearby waters. We dove and carried out some exercises, then surfaced and returned to base. I enjoyed having the experience but would not like to serve in a submarine.

HMCS Ribble completed her acceptance trials off Blyth in Northumberland, in northeast England. The full crew arrived from HMCS Niobe (the Canadian Navy’s training establishment in Britain) and the ship was commissioned August 1944. During her trials careful notes were made of her speed at the various amounts of power and of her turning circle. We did not find out until we worked with the Canadian built frigates that we had an extra knot in the engine room.

At the commissioning ceremony the RCN Band from HMCS Niobe provided the music. The RN Captain of HMS Elfin, the naval base at Blyth, welcomed the ship into the navy and referred to the contribution the people from the colonies were making. It was with great pride we sang O Canada with our own Canadian band, disregarding the slight.

The Captain of Ribble was Lieut. Allan Taylor of Minas, N.S. He had been captain of a coastal vessel carrying salt from the Minas Basin. The Executive Officer was Lieut. Harry (Bubs) Holland, RCNVR from Toronto. The Signals Officer Lieut. Ed Brockwell RCNVR, was from Toronto. The Sonar Officer was Lieut. Ward Watson, RCNVR from Brandon. Lieut. Charlie Christie, RCNVR came from Amherst, N.S., Sub.Lieut. Paul Bertrand, RCNVR was from Montreal, as was Lieut. Ron Rankin, RCNVR. Lieut. (E) Horace Denyer, RCNVR came from Saint John, N.B. We did get a second engineer officer later, Sub Lieut. (E) Tom Webster. Our Doctor was Dudley Dickie from Digby, N.S.

Leaving Blyth, we sailed along the swept channel along the coast north about Scotland, through the Pentland Firth and south to Tobermory on the Inner Hebrides Island of Mull. There was a workups base at Torbermory, presided over by Commodore Sir Gilbert Stevenson. Stevenson had been a Rear Admiral before the war but took the little demotion so that he could participate in the war effort. And participate he did. Every crew that went through the training period knew they had been through the wringer. There were surprise visits by the Commodore and extra exercises to bring out the best in the crews. Every ship had a core of experienced hands but the new crew had to get to know every aspect of work on the ship and how to work as a team.

One of the tests the Commodore carried out was to sneak aboard a ship, which was at anchor, and throw his hat on the deck and shout "That's an incendiary bomb". The crew was meant to go to fire stations and smother the so called bomb. One time, we heard, the first crew member on the scene kicked the cap over the side. End of fire drill!

The Commodore's Secretary was Joan Fleming, a Wren I had known in Londonderry two years before. She was the older sister of Betty Fleming, who married Garth Rowsome, a long time friend and shipmate aboard Moose Jaw. I went cycling around the island with her a couple of times.

When the Commodore said we were ready, Ribble was informed that we were to go to Londonderry to await the arrival of Canadian Escort Group C4 for service with that group escorting transatlantic convoys. With that advice all of our pay books were transferred from Niobe in Scotland to St. Johns in Newfoundland which would be our new base.

We were in Londonderry for several days before being informed that there was a change. We would be part of Escort Group 26, a so called hunter-killer group patrolling particular areas or adding extra support for convoys under attack and we would be in Home Waters, meaning near Britain, which was the main theatre of war. It also meant that our pay books would be at Niobe. Unfortunately they had been sent to St. Johns by

service passage. It was a couple of months before we got paid what we were owed. The intervening pay days were made up of estimated casual payments.

Our first job was a hurry up call with two of our new group mates, HMC Ships New Glasgow and Jonquiere. We were to sail 800 miles south towards the Azores to escort the frigate HMCS Chebogue which had been hit by an acoustic torpedo while escorting an Outward Northern convoy back to North America. We reached her in two days. One of the convoy escorts was towing her. As the junior ship in our group of three we were assigned to take the damaged ship in tow heading for Swansea in Wales. The other two provided escort. After a day or so of towing we were relieved by an ocean tug. We then provided the escort. On arrival off Swansea the weather was starting to storm. We saw Chebogue on its way in to harbour then took off at best speed to return to Londonderry. Immediately after getting into the Irish Sea to go north, the full force of the storm struck. As the water was fairly shallow the ship suddenly took some big waves. Anything that was not battened down went flying. In the Wardroom, the Chief Engineer and the Doctor were sitting at the Wardroom table censoring mail. The sudden wave sent the heavy Chief flying across the room, knocking the table apart. The Wardroom was a wreck of its own. As for Chebogue, it was damaged as it went into the harbour and was eventually written off as a constructive loss.

Around 1943 it became apparent that Canada was turning out more men than were needed for the ships that could be built in Canada. Larger ships were needed and the Lachine Canal locks limited the size of ships to small vessels. But there more escort ships being built in Britain than they had men trained for convoy work. Canada agreed to man ten new frigates and a half a dozen Castle class corvettes. The ten included three River Class frigates that had been originally manned by the British and whose crews were replaced by Canadians, four new River Class frigates taken over directly from the builders, and three of the new Loch Class Frigates. As new sensors and weapons were developed bigger ships were needed to accommodate the operators and the maintainers. The original 1940 corvette had a crew of 45. Those same ships were carrying more than 80 in 1944.

Ribble was one of the last Canadian manned ships to commission in the UK. The crew that came aboard had more than its share of men that had been on other ships and had been sent ashore for various disciplinary charges. It meant we had several more people who had problems with drinking and wild living. In most cases they were very good seamen, better than average.

The mess decks were not the only place that drinking problems emerged. A few of our officers had too much war and tried to find comfort in a glass. Luckily the Captains Standing Orders said that the Officer of the Day could not have anything to drink during his period on watch. I had one experience when I was OOD and the other officers had a party. We were sailing at 0800 the next day from Londonderry. I was up on time and called the Captain and the First Lieutenant and also the other officers. As we prepared for sailing, a couple of the other officers appeared on deck, bleary eyed. The Foyle River Pilot came on board. We had enough upper deck staff to slip the lines. About the time we

slipped, the First Lieutenant appeared. We sailed down river to Loch Foyle and went alongside the oil tanker to top up our fuel supply. When we finished fuelling we slipped and as we went out the gate of the Loch the Captain came on deck and asked why he wasn't called, especially as we were working with the other ships of our group. It wasn't long after the Captain got his request to return to Canada and we got a new CO.

One of our first jobs was to join with another escort group of five ships to search for a submarine reported to be off the north coast of Ireland. There we were, a group of ten ships doing a box search in hopes of finding the sub. We carried out that search for almost two days but found nothing. During the second morning the Senior Officer asked all the ships to estimate our position, noting that the wind and set of the current would have moved us. With our new radar I could pick out a mountain top 95 miles away which we could identify as being the Tor in Donegal. I checked with a depth sounder to confirm. I think our estimate was the most accurate.

The first Captain of Ribble, Lieut. Allan Taylor, RCNR was relieved of his command in early December He was replaced by Lieut. A.A.R. Dykes, RCNR who had earlier been in command of the corvette Calgary and the minesweeper Caraquet. Lieut. Dykes whose nickname was "Daisy" was a graduate of the training ship Conway. The first port that we entered after he took command was Milford Haven in Wales. As we came alongside the oiler the new Captain gave just two orders then said "Ring Off, Finished with engines". We on the bridge could hear the cheer from the Engine Room. Dykes was a hero. He was a good ship handler.

My appointment to Ribble was as Navigation officer. Most of the ships in the Canadian navy were convoy escort vessels, carrying from five to ten officers. In HMCS Moose Jaw, a corvette, we had five officers, the Captain, the First Lieutenant, the Navigator, the Gunnery or Anti Submarine Officer, and usually an Officer under training. The Executive Officer stood the Morning and Dog Watches, that is from 0400 to 0800, AM and PM. Coming off watch at 0800 he could direct the working of the ships company, have breakfast, then supervise the days work. The Gunnery Officer was on watch in the Forenoon, 0800 to 1200 and again in the Evening Watch 2000 to 2400. The navigator worked the Afternoon and Middle watches, that is from 1200 to 1600 and again 2400 to 0400. The frigate Ribble had nine officers in total, two officers in each watch, plus one or two Engineer officers. Some times we carried a doctor who was available to serve other ships in the group.

The ships Captain usually laid out standing orders. For the navigator in addition to being in charge of his watch he was required to be on the bridge when the ship was entering or leaving harbour, when in company with other ships and was to be up to take star sights in the morning and evening twilights. In addition he was charged with keeping the charts and the Notices to Mariners up to date. Keeping the chronometer on time was also his job. In the daily routine of coming on watch each officer was ordered to be on the bridge fifteen minutes before the start time. Before taking over the watch he was required to read the Night Order Book, the Situation Report, and the Signal Log, plus look at the chart to

see where the ship was. Before leaving the bridge he was to enter into the Log Book all the events of the watch plus the details on the weather and the state of the sea. Sleep was not a big part of the Navigators life at sea. In harbour the navigator took his turn as Officer of the Day. Because it was almost impossible to fill all the duties all the time it was easy for the Captain to get rid of an officer for negligence if he didn't like him.

The 26th Escort Group was made up of the frigates Beaconhill, New Glasgow, Jonquiere, Montreal, and Ribble. The Senior Officer, Cdr. E.T. Simmons, RCNVR, was in command. He was also Captain of Beacon Hill.

The Escort Groups were planned to assist convoys under attack but as the course of the war was at a different stage our job became one of protecting the shipping lanes near the entrances to the European War Zone. We were off the approaches to the Irish Sea and the English Channel. Some of the other groups were working off the Norwegian Coast. The normal operations plan was to get all ready for sea in Londonderry then proceed to an area in the Channel for a couple of weeks, then go into a Channel port for fuel and provisions, then back to sea for another two weeks, then back to Derry for boiler clean, refuelling and reprovisioning and leave to about half the crew. When we were in our operating area we were usually divided into two groups, Beaconhill, New Glasgow, and Jonquiere in one and Montreal and Ribble in the other. The area we saw the most of was the south side of Lands End where the English Channel met the Irish Sea. The chart we used most covered the south west English Coast from the Lizard to the Longships or the coasts of Devon and Cornwall.

In mid December we sailed from Londonderry and went to the south side of Lands End accompanied by HMCS Montreal. One night, Dec. 16, I think, we got a contact indicating a submarine sitting on the bottom. It was about a mile east of Wolf Rock, a lonely beacon out in the channel, about 10 miles off shore. We had a submarine type echo. We also ran over the target with the Echo Sounder. It gave us a perfect picture of the outline of a submarine as viewed from above. We dropped a pattern of depth charges but had no result. The following night we had the same experience with the contact, the submarine picture and no results from another pattern of charges. Looking at the nautical chart of the area it was evident that the particular location was the exact spot where the current from the English Channel met the current coming down from the Irish Sea. The confluence of the two currents made for very turbulent waters making submarine detection difficult.

The following day, around mid morning, there was signal from the Light Keeper at Wolf Rock that he was being invaded by German submariners. We dashed back to that place and found a mass of sailors floating in the sea. They had on waterproof survivor suits. Our two ships commenced picking these men out of the sea. Montreal picked up eighteen and so did Ribble.

When we had these men on board they were given dry clothes and we started to quiz them. All we could officially ask was for name, rank, and official number. Of the officers on board I was the only one that had studied any German so it was my job to do the

interrogation. There were a couple of ratings on board who had some German language skills and they helped. The Germans were put to work helping the cook, peeling potatoes and any other chores where they could be kept under easy observation. They were fed the same as the crew. Part of the crew was detailed off to provide a guard. There was one officer in the group and he was held in the Wardroom. The area Commander ordered our two ships to keep on patrol. It was found that one of the Germans had been killed while being hauled on board when the line bringing him up from the sea got caught around his neck and strangled him. The orders from shore were to bury this fellow at sea. The coxswain the Shipwright, and the Sick Berth Attendant made the preparations assisted by a couple of Petty Officers. Without any orders to do otherwise we let the German Officer conduct the service of slipping the body overboard in to the sea.

Two days later we were ordered to go in to Plymouth to land our prisoners. This we did and then it was back out on patrol for another ten days before we went back to Derry for our regular boiler cleaning.

The group arrived in Derry on the 27th or 28th. Because of the heavy demands for holiday travel on the local rail system, it was decided that one ship of our group would take all the men wanting to go to England or Scotland for leave across to Liverpool. As we were the junior ship we got the job. As soon as possible after arriving in Londonderry we were off again. On arrival the next morning at the repair dock in Liverpool we were met by buses to take the leave party to the train station or assembly point. The local bus company hired was the Ribble Bus Company.

It was not my turn for leave so that I had to look around for New Years Eve entertainment. Paul Bertrand and I heard about a party at a Womens Auxiliary Territorial Service Mess at Southport which was reachable by local train service so we went there to welcome the New Year in.

When we got back to the ship the Wardroom was a mess. The Chief and the Doctor and another officer had a real drinking bout to see who was the strongest. There was broken glass everywhere. Paul and I were glad we hadn't been part of it. At the end of the five days we got all of our passengers back and it was back to Londonderry to rejoin the group.

Now that we were all ready for sea the group took off again to go the south coast of England. We went to the Bay of the Seine off the invasion beaches. Britain had a heavy snowfall that year. As we sailed along the coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula you could see all the shell holes from Utah Beach clearly outlined. The British had erected very high radar towers on the Isle of Wight to give maximum information on the Channel and in Normandy. We were patrolling along closer to the coast than we should have been when we got a clear voice message from a Wren at the Radar station telling us that we were sailing in to a minefield and alter course to get out of the area. We did.

When the Allies landed in Normandy they did not capture Cherbourg but left it alone. They also stayed away from the Channel Islands. While we were in that part of the

Channel we stayed at least thirteen miles away from any shore battery on the Islands as they were still in German hands. Thirteen miles was the range of their guns. The Germans eventually had to give up as they could not be supplied with new provisions and could not go home on leave.

We had our mid patrol refuelling in Portsmouth. The snow was still deep on the ground. I recall one night when we went to a pub and ended up having a snowball throwing competition with the Wrens we were with.

On one occasion while in the Channel we went in to Portland Bill, the port for Weymouth, Dorset, to refuel. The harbour consists of a long mole out in to the Channel providing a safe harbour. Fuelling berths were available. After we had secured alongside, the Engineer Officer, Horace Denyer, went to locate the oil connection. He had the Chief Stoker, Wes Clark, with him. In the dark the E.O. tripped on something and fell off the dock onto a barge carrying chain, that lay alongside. He was not hurt, he said, so carried on. Many years later when I was in Vancouver I got a letter from Veterans Affairs saying that Lieut. Denyer had applied for a pension for a war related injury that had occurred while refuelling at a port on the south coast of England. Did I know anything about it? I was able to tell them that the accident had occurred at Portland Bill and that Chief P.O. Clark was with him. I gave them Clark's address as he was here in Vancouver working as a mechanic for CP Air. I presume Denyer got his pension.

It was also at Portland that we had a slight accident. As the ship was manoeuvring we hit a sharp object that put a small hole on the side of the port bow. The men in the mess deck behind the point of contact were startled to find a ships bow coming into the mess. A patch was put on and we carried on. My memory is not clear on all the details, but I cannot recall which ship was there with us.

Another remembrance from the Channel area was a call in to the harbour of Torquay. A group of us from Ribble went golfing at a course a few miles away. We travelled on the local bus. We were surprised at one point to see one of a group of sailors on the bus celebrating a day ashore, go up to the driver to ask a favour. The driver nodded OK and soon stopped. The rating, a "three badge AB" got off the bus, went around to the rear, relieved himself, then got happily back on. The golf course had not been looked after since the war started so the gorse had grown quite tall. The fairways were narrow and we only had a few old balls, as rubber for golf had no priority. However it was nice to get back on the course.

On another occasion in March 7th we were patrolling on the north side of Cornwall in the area of the entrance to the St. David Channel. The Asdic rating reported a submarine echo so we went to action stations and swept over the target. There were no wrecks in that location showing on the Wreck Chart. The object was classified as a bottomed submarine so we dropped a pattern of depth charges. A great amount of oil came up as well as some body parts and some first aid bandages. We reported our success to the Commander in Chief. The answer came back that another group had been in that location the day before and had located, attacked and sank a sub. They got the glory!

Toward the end of March, on the 20th, four of our group sailed out of Loch Foyle in the evening turning to the east in line abreast ready to go on a training exercise in Loch Alshe. We had only gone a few miles when the port lookout in the frigate New Glasgow which was the furthest to port, reported hearing a low flying aircraft. That report was followed by a bang and the ship realized it had been hit. A few of the bridge personnel saw the schnorkel of a submarine at the last moment before the collision. The group immediately went to action stations and carried out a sweep so that the sub could be finished off. We were unable to locate her in the days of searching. Post war reports indicate the sub lay low hoping to make repairs but decided to abandon ship. The noise of the schnorkel vent was mistaken for an engine. Looking at the map in later years I realized we were just off Port Rush where Cynthia and I visited her relatives.

Another action we had was in the Channel off of Lands End on the 22nd of February. We were on our regular patrol when we got a signal that HMCS Trentonian, a corvette on the inshore swept channel convoy run had been torpedoed, several miles east of our position and just south of Falmouth. We were directed to close and hunt for the sub. The other four ships of the group were with us and we all headed east at full speed. After an hours steaming we were a mile ahead of the other four ships. On arrival at the position of the sinking there was no evidence of anything. The survivors had been picked up. A search revealed nothing.

One clear day off the south tip of Cornwall we spotted an aircraft going very fast. Much faster than any Spitfire we had ever seen. We later found out it was a test flight for the new jet type aircraft.

The war was winding down. We knew that it was going to end soon. Rumours started flying around about going home. The Canadian Government sent out a signal asking who wanted out and who was willing to go on to the war against Japan. Since my cousin Gary Morris, who had been captured in the Philippines, had not been located I agreed to stay on. A very large number voted to get out of the navy and go home.

At last victory was claimed. May 8, 1945 was to be Victory in Europe Day. Our group was in the Channel off the Isle of Wight. We received the signal to anchor off the town of Sandown on the Isle of Wight. We were to Splice the Main Brace, then go back to patrolling, looking out for Submariners that might not want to surrender. That night we were in the swept channel, west bound, when our group encountered a convoy sailing east. We all had to turn our running lights on to make sure no one collided.

The group was in Portsmouth Harbour when the group got the message to return to Derry and then go home. Ribble was to proceed to Sheerness and return the ship to the Royal Navy. Ribble slipped first and as we sailed away we added a roll bandage to the end of the commissioning pennant to give us the traditional long pennant to show that we had been away from home for a long time. It streamed out the full length of the ship.

At Sheerness we secured along side some of the other ships that had been manned by the Canadians. A small group of RNVR officers came on board to take delivery of the vessel. To say the least, they were an odd looking bunch, the long and the short and the tall. We had to muster all of our books and charts and moveable equipment. I was able to get my charts in order quite quickly. The ship had a lot of things in Londonderry that needed to be collected. With a small work party I went to Derry. That required getting to shore in Sheerness, take a train to London, then another train to Stranraer in Scotland, then the ferry across the Irish Sea to Larne, then the train to Londonderry. A two day trip!

There was all the ships laundry plus the officer's laundry to be picked up. We had a case of whiskey that we had bought but had not yet taken delivery of. I went on board the corvette Coppercliff, which was built in Blyth when we were. They took delivery of the scotch as it had to go to a sea going ship. To get the twelve bottles out of the dockyard I put a three bottles in my suitcase, one in each jacket pocket and one in each raincoat pocket. The rest was carried out by members of the work party in their ditty boxes.

When we got back to Sheerness the officers had to divide the Wardroom assets which consisted mainly of spirits. I got about four bottles. There wasn't any cash dividend. Because I was going to be going through dockyard gates and possible Customs Officers I declared the spirits I had and paid the duty, getting a receipt. When I got to Greenoch, I went to Customs there, showed them my receipt and that I was going aboard a sea going ship so got my money back. British Customs did their best to prevent duty free spirits from naval ships going ashore.

Our crew was to go to Niobe in Greenoch, Scotland to take service passage home to Halifax. I was only at Niobe for about a day when I went aboard the Canadian frigate Lauzon for the voyage home. I was able to use the settee in the Chartroom as a place to sleep. It was an uneventful and different crossing of the Atlantic as there were no ships to convoy. No zigzagging, just stay with the escort group

I will start a new chapter about my time in Lauzon, brief as it was, but so different than Ribble.