

## SPECIAL FEATURE

## Battle of the Atlantic – 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Mentioned in Dispatches

*For naval veteran Lou Howard, the day the RCN lost its last warship to enemy action in the Battle of the Atlantic was one he would never forget.*

By Brian McCullough.  
Vintage photos supplied by Lou Howard.

The tiny bronze oak leaf insignia that 96-year-old Second World War naval veteran Lou Howard wore on the ribbon of his 1939-45 War Medal could easily be overlooked. It is barely 30 millimetres long by nine millimetres wide, and yet it signals to the fleet, and to anyone else who cares to ask, that this white-haired gentleman with the perfect manners was awarded Mention in Dispatches (MID) during his war service to Canada.

It is a select honour indeed. Of the nearly 100,000 men and women who served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the war, only 1037 MIDs were awarded for “valiant conduct, devotion to duty or other distinguished service.”

For Lou Howard, a Selkirk, Manitoba native and retired civil engineer, the incident that changed his life forever would come out of a cold blue sea on a calm, sunny day within sight of the Halifax area coastline. The date was Monday, April 16, 1945 – the day the *Bangor*-class minesweeper HMCS *Esquimalt* (J272) became the last Canadian warship to be lost to enemy action during the six-year Battle of the Atlantic.

At the time, Howard was the navigation and asdic (anti-submarine sonar) officer aboard *Esquimalt*'s sister ship, HMCS *Sarnia* (J309). As a Hostilities Only recruit, he had no intention of making a career of the Navy, but said he was eager to do his bit.

In the fall of 1942, Howard was studying first-year engineering at the University of Manitoba when he joined the University Naval Training Divisions (UNTD) program as a seaman-officer candidate at HMCS *Chippawa* in Winnipeg. In December 1943 he enlisted for active service as an ordinary seaman in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). Fully expecting to become a stoker, he underwent basic training at HMCS *Cornwallis* in Nova Scotia, which included familiarization aboard the school's training ship, HMCS *Hamilton*, an old four-stacker destroyer acquired on lend-lease from the Americans.



Photo by Brian McCullough

Lou Howard joined the Royal Canadian Navy as a volunteer seaman in December 1943, and by the end of 1944 was sporting the single wavy stripe of a sub-lieutenant in the RCNVR. He said the discipline remained an integral part of his lifestyle for more than 75 years.

And then things changed. In the spring of 1944, Howard successfully challenged an officer selection board, and that summer went on his divisional officer's course at HMCS *Discovery* in Vancouver. In September, he went back east for signals, navigation and asdic training at HMCS *Kings*, the wartime naval officer training school established at University of King's College (Dalhousie University) in Halifax. Howard graduated at the beginning of November with a single wavy stripe on his sleeve, and celebrated by marrying his childhood sweetheart, Marjorie Benson, on Christmas Eve. They were both just 20 years old. The couple would have three children together, and remain married for 62 years until Marjorie's death in 2007.

When Howard reported for duty as a sub-lieutenant on board HMCS *Sarnia* on January 2, 1945 – his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday – he had no idea what life aboard a small ship in the winter North Atlantic would be like. The cold and wet, the poor food and lack of sleep, the boredom and the stress of maintaining vigilance against the underwater threat of U-boats would soon imprint themselves as his new normal. With a crew of 78, the ship was also seriously overcrowded.

Both *Sarnia* and *Esquimalt* were relatively new ships, having been commissioned into service as minesweepers at Montreal-area shipyards in 1942. By 1944, however, the 600-ton vessels – less than two-thirds the displacement of a corvette – had been outfitted with asdic and radar, and were operating as anti-submarine ocean escorts for small groups of merchant ships marshalling in Halifax from ports along the Atlantic seaboard. The assembled ships would then sail in large convoy toward St. John's, and then on to the UK.

“It was a frenzy trying to get those convoys organized,” Howard said. “The spies knew when we were sailing, and we’d be running around trying to get these ships in order, and to get them to stop making smoke. Things settled down by the time we got 25 miles out from the Halifax gates, but we spent a lot of time at actions stations. We were constantly lacking sleep.”

Howard said the work became almost routine, handing off fully laden convoys to UK-based escorts that came out to meet them mid-Atlantic, then turning around to escort a convoy of “empties” back to Canada. The round trip would take about 14 days, which pushed the vessels to the limits of their endurance.

“Our small ships weren’t designed for convoy work,” Howard said. “After four or five days at sea, our fridges were empty.”

The sea and weather could also be formidable adversaries to these shallow-draft escorts. In February 1945, *Sarnia* was escorting a convoy from Boston to Halifax in the teeth



SLt Lou Howard aboard HMCS *Sarnia* in 1945. Three other crew members, including the captain, were awarded Mention in Dispatches for their actions on the day HMCS *Esquimalt* was torpedoed and lost.

of a strong north-easterly gale when the ship began to ice up heavily. As the ice rapidly accumulated on the upper decks and superstructure, the ship’s roll became dangerously sluggish – heeling 30-plus degrees to starboard, before slowly righting and going over 30-plus degrees to port. There was real danger the small minesweeper would capsize, and Howard recalled the fright among the crew as they hove-to and began clearing away the ice as quickly as they could.

And there was Lady Luck to contend with as well. Shortly after returning from that stormy trip back from Boston, Huff Duff – the ship’s cat – went missing. Named after the familiar term for the ship’s high-frequency direction-finding (HF/DF) gear, the cat was something of a talisman on board. The crew wasn’t happy having to sail on their next trip without him, but were relieved when Huff Duff somehow found them when they got back a week later, despite being berthed as the third outboard ship at a

HMCS *Sarnia*





The small *Bangor*-class minesweepers were never designed for the mid-Atlantic convoy escort duties they were called on to perform toward the end of the war. When refrigerated provisions ran out after five days at sea, the cook would bring out waxed turnips and parsnips to see the crew of 78 through to the end of their two-week round trip.

different jetty than usual. In proper naval fashion, Huff Duff was summarily hauled before the captain's table as a defaulter, and given 30 days stoppage of leave. Howard said the entire crew was much more at ease when they sailed on their next convoy escort assignment with their feline mascot at his usual post.

Tragically, luck would run out for their sister ship, HMCS *Esquimalt*. By the end of March 1945, the two ships were off convoy duty and reassigned to anti-submarine patrols in the Halifax Approaches. There was nothing unusual when they were called out on April 15 to search for a U-boat that was suspected to be prowling in the area, but *Sarnia* knew something was wrong when *Esquimalt* missed their scheduled rendezvous at 0800 the next morning. *Sarnia*'s captain, Lt. Bob Douty, reported this to the authorities ashore, but received no response. He was intending to leave his sector to search for the other minesweeper when his ship picked up a strong asdic contact, forcing him to prosecute an attack with depth charges. It turned up nothing. Finally, at 1125, the shore authorities seemed to wake up to the fact that *Esquimalt* was overdue, and initiated a coordinated search. The delays would prove costly.

In fact, *Esquimalt* had been attacked at 0632 that morning with an acoustic torpedo fired from the German submarine U-190. The ship immediately lost all electrical power, and sank within minutes without being able to transmit a distress signal. The drenched survivors took to the Carley floats, where they would suffer for the next six

hours before some were rescued by a boat's crew from the nearby Halifax East Light Vessel. *Sarnia* arrived on scene at 1230, and dangerously stopped engines for close to half an hour to pick up 27 survivors and 13 dead before getting underway and racing back to Halifax Dockyard at full speed. In all, 44 men lost their lives that day.

The citation for Howard's Mention in Dispatches reads in part: "This Officer... went over the ship's side to help bring men aboard, and... was personally responsible for saving a life after applying artificial respiration for over an hour. Sub lieutenant Howard's conduct during this time... aided greatly in helping the wounded and the dying."

Howard had spent 30 minutes waist-deep in the near-freezing sea at the bottom of a scramble net, transferring survivors and bodies from the rescue boat to waiting hands on deck. The former Winnipeg Beach lifeguard would supervise further resuscitation efforts, but sadly the sailor he had revived died before the ship got back to Halifax. It was the first time he had seen dead and injured. Even some of the men they brought on board alive, died after reaching the deck. It was as if they knew they were safe and could give up the struggle, he said.

No one spoke of post-traumatic stress disorder in those days, but the effect of the day's events on Howard became visible when his hair began to turn white almost immediately. What terrified him most, he said, was the "heart-stopping" 20 minutes or so when his ship was stopped dead in the water as they picked up *Esquimalt*'s crew.

"We were down on that scramble net, and we knew a submarine was out there," he said. "I was scared stiff that whole time."

In the strange ways of the aftermath of war, Howard would meet U-190's chief engineer, Werner Hirschmann, at an *Esquimalt* and *Sarnia* reunion on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking in 1995. The two would go on to become friends, and remained so until Hirschmann's death last November at the age of 96. Hirschmann had spent a short time as a prisoner of war in Gravenhurst, Ontario before being repatriated to Germany. He later emigrated to Canada.

In the fall of 2017, Howard was warmly received at the legendary Crow's Nest Officers' Club in St. John's, Newfoundland, where he donated a souvenir *Sarnia* pennant. He also took the opportunity to examine, of all things, U-190's periscope that had been salvaged in 1947 and donated to the mess in 1963. Following U-190's surrender in



1945, the German vessel was commissioned into the RCN as an anti-submarine training vessel, and was eventually sunk as a target in a massive show of naval firepower at the exact spot where *Esquimalt* had met her fate 30 months earlier.

Howard spent the final days of the war at sea. As Halifax erupted into chaos during the May 7-8, 1945 VE-Day riots, his small ship was left lolling on its own within spitting distance of the shore. Another week would pass before they would be allowed to come back in.

“I was on the bridge of HMCS *Sarnia*, seeing the glow in the sky from the fires that were happening in Halifax, and the guy in the radio shack put on Doris Day singing Sentimental Journey,” Howard said. “The war was over, and we’d come out of it, but they’d forgotten about us out there.”

Deeply affected by the extreme conditions he had endured, and by the horror of the futility of war he had experienced on that sunny day in the Halifax Approaches when HMCS *Esquimalt* was lost, Howard swore he would never go to sea again. It was a promise he kept until he finally acceded to his second wife Hyacinthe Wade’s wishes the year after they were married, and booked a Cape Horn cruise for the two of them in 2012.

Howard said that, despite everything, he remained proud of his wartime naval service to Canada.

“I was determined to be a good naval officer, and the structure and routine of the Navy fit right in with who I was,” he said. “At 21 years of age I was in the thick of the battle, I had to respond, and I did my duty.”



Survivors of the minesweeper HMCS *Esquimalt* waited six hours to be rescued after their ship was torpedoed by U-190 in the Halifax Approaches on April 16, 1945. Forty-four of their shipmates died in this final loss of a Canadian warship to enemy action during the six-year Battle of the Atlantic.



Photo by Brian McCullough

This HMCS *Esquimalt* memorial cairn has a place of honour on the lawn of the town hall of Esquimalt, BC, not far from the naval dockyard. An annual remembrance ceremony is normally held here on April 16, the anniversary of the ship’s loss.

***A sad postscript:*** It was my very great pleasure to enjoy a number of lively conversations with Lou Howard in the preparation of this article, a shorter version of which appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen* in 2017. It saddens me now to report that Lou died on May 4, one day after Canada commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Battle of the Atlantic. He was a remarkable Canadian, one of many who answered the call in our country’s hour of need. – **Brian McCullough**

Read more about Lou Howard’s wartime experience at: <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/406:louis-henry-howard/>

Another first-hand account of the *Esquimalt* incident, from *Sarnia* engine room artificer petty officer veteran Liam Dwyer, is at: <http://www.thememoryproject.com/stories/1314:liam-dwyer/>

An excellent detailed account of this tragic incident and its aftermath, written by historian Robert C. Fisher, appears on the website of the CFB Esquimalt Naval & Military Museum: <https://navalandmilitarymuseum.org/archives/articles/ship-histories/hmcs-esquimalt/>

