

SPECIAL FEATURE

Battle of the Atlantic – 75th Anniversary

A Young Engineer's Service in the Battle of the Atlantic

By Captain Rolfe Monteith, CD, RCN (Ret'd)

At age 96, I am in that perilous phase of life in which I am attempting to recall the past with any kind of clarity, so forgive an old seadog if I steer a bit of a zigzag course in describing certain aspects of the 1939-1945 war at sea that affected me deeply. While my shipboard service as a young Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) engineering officer under training was not confined to the North Atlantic theatre, it was part of that epic struggle known as the Battle of the Atlantic.

During the final months of 1943, I served as a Midshipman (E) trainee aboard the newly commissioned Royal Navy V-class destroyer HMS *Hardy* (R08) – one of a long list of Royal Navy ships to bear that famous name. The previous *Hardy*, an H-class destroyer commissioned in December 1936, was lost during the First Battle of Narvik in April 1940. There was no way I could have known that history would tragically repeat itself with my own ship in 1944, shortly after I had returned ashore to continue my naval engineering training.

Limited though it was, my seagoing experience during wartime operations in the Bay of Biscay, Gibraltar, Scapa Flow, and on the Arctic convoys to Russia, influenced me throughout my full 29-year career with the Royal Canadian Navy, and helped establish personal friendships and international connections that I enjoy to this day. My few months spent running the gauntlet of enemy submarine and air attacks might be part of a distant past, but allow me to offer some personal perspective on a battle that was won at enormous cost to so many people such a very long time ago.

The Battle of the Atlantic was by far the longest campaign of the Second World War. As had been the case just over a quarter century earlier, maintaining control of



Midshipman Rolfe Monteith aboard HMS *Hardy* at Gibraltar in 1943.

the North Atlantic was crucial to the survival of Britain and to the eventual Allied victory. Keeping the sea lanes between North America and the United Kingdom open allowed convoys of merchant ships to transport the troops, food, fuel, armaments and other critical supplies that were desperately needed to sustain Britain in her hour of need, and support the Allied operations in Europe and North Africa. That we were able to safely escort many of these ships on to Russia's northern ports of Murmansk and Archangel meant that allied Soviet forces could defend their homeland, and keep the enemy engaged along a second major front.

The battle began on the evening of September 3, 1939 when the British passenger liner SS *Athenia*, bound for Canada with 1,418 crew and passengers, including children, was torpedoed by U-30 off the coast of Ireland

The destroyer HMS *Hardy* (R08) at speed in 1943.



with the loss of 117 lives, including 54 Canadians. Canada would declare war on Germany one week later, and over the next six years would support the war at sea in every way imaginable.

Eager to join the fray myself, I attempted to join the Royal Canadian Navy in mid-1940 as a boy seaman at the age of 16. The chief petty officer in charge of the recruiting unit wisely persuaded me to return to my education, and to apply again the following year as a naval cadet under the Commonwealth Special Entry system. Obeying orders even then, I did just that, and was accepted under Special Entry No 55, along with 30 other Canadians. As a point of interest, Prince Philip joined the Royal Navy as a cadet under SE No 53 in 1939.

Being accepted as a naval cadet, I was required to select which branch of the RCN I wished to join. Coming from the farming town of Clinton, Ontario, I knew nothing of the Navy, and blindly selected engineering. Once I was enrolled, however, it was explained to me that I would have to take a three-year degree course at the Royal Naval Engineering College in Plymouth, England. This did not sit well with my enthusiasm to get into the thick of things as soon as possible, and so I contemplated a different plan as my cadet class prepared to head overseas.

The RCN cadets of SE 55 crossed the Atlantic aboard the armed merchant cruiser RMS *Laconia*, a converted Cunard passenger liner, in convoy (HX 147) with 64 merchant ships and an escort screen that included several Canadian corvettes, and the Town-class destroyer HMCS *Columbia*. We reached Liverpool in late August 1941 without loss.

It was a critical time in the war. As soon as I reached Royal Naval College Dartmouth, I applied to transfer to the executive branch – the operational side of the Navy. My divisional officer, Lt Cdr Brook, a Royal Navy (RN) gunnery officer and a veteran of the First World War, pleaded with me to withdraw my request, explaining that, “One day the war will be over, and with an engineering degree you will have a productive second career.” It was a very emotional moment for me, as I was very young and dead keen to become deeply involved in the war. Lt Cdr Brook won the day, however, and I am indebted to him for directing me toward a most rewarding career in the RCN as an engineer, and a productive civilian career afterward with British industry.

Basic training at Royal Naval College Dartmouth included cadets from Britain, New Zealand, South Africa and India. As Europe had fallen the previous year, SE 55



Naval Cadet Rolfe Monteith on guard duty at Royal Naval College Dartmouth, UK in 1941.

was also blessed with having cadets from Norway, Denmark, Belgium and France. Cadet Monteith might not have realized it at the time, but the friendships and worldwide contacts made at Dartmouth would become even more relevant after the war.

As my classes and shore training progressed over the next two years, I looked forward to when we would go aboard ship for the sea phase of our naval education. It must be appreciated that, when we finally joined HMS *Hardy* in late 1943, our time aboard ship was intended to broaden our horizons as junior officers by having us spend time in each department of the ship. It might be heresy for an engineer to admit it, but what I found most interesting was standing watches on the bridge.

In September 1943, *Hardy* joined the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow for workups. In mid-October, we sailed in company with HMCS *Haida* and HMCS *Iroquois*, and the RN destroyers *Janus* and *Vigilant*, as escort for the battleship HMS *Anson* that was carrying a relief garrison to the remote Norwegian island of Spitsbergen in the Barents Sea. In late November, we safely

escorted the Russian convoy JW 54B to Murmansk and Archangel. These Arctic trips were dangerous affairs, as we were under almost constant surveillance by German reconnaissance aircraft and frequently at action stations.

As a very young midshipman, I was on a steep learning curve aboard ship. Being in the engineering branch, I naturally came to the attention of the squadron engineer – one Cdr Ernie Mill – who insisted that I be able to operate and restart any and all machinery in the ship, even if a compartment were blacked out. It was an invaluable lesson in damage control in case of enemy action, especially on the convoys from Scapa Flow to Russia where we could expect attacks by German U-boats and Luftwaffe aircraft at any time.

With my action station being on the quarterdeck, I got to know the crew responsible for manning the anti-submarine depth charges at the stern. One of these sailors was the ship's postman who had been in the RN for some 20 years and was still an able seaman. He was a fabulous chap.

One night while watchkeeping in the engine room, the petty officer on watch mentioned that he had been sunk off the coast of West Africa in a previous ship about a year earlier. It turned out he was speaking of the *Laconia* – the very same ship I had made my Atlantic crossing on in 1941. My world suddenly felt very small, and while it touched me in a personal way, there was even greater significance in how this incident altered the conduct of German U-boat operations for the remainder of the war.

As an armed transport, the *Laconia* was a legitimate target of war when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-156 on September 12, 1942. She was making a fast, unescorted passage from South Africa to Britain when she was hit. Unfortunately, she had 2,732 crew and passengers on board, including women and children, and a large number of Italian prisoners of war. Following his successful attack, the German U-boat commander acted in a most gallant fashion by surfacing to assist survivors, but was horrified to find so many non-military personnel in the water, along with 1,500 Italian allies.

There are many sad aspects to this event, but none so awful as what happened afterward. As U-156 and other U-boats crammed their decks with survivors, they signaled on open channels that they were conducting a humanitarian rescue operation under a Red Cross banner. A patrolling U.S. Army Air Forces B-24 Liberator spotted them and reported the nature of the operation, but was ordered to attack the enemy vessels. When it was all over, some 1,619 people (1,420 of them Italian prisoners) had perished in the sinking and its tragic aftermath, and a new order – the *Laconia Order* – was issued by the German naval command, forbidding U-boats from assisting survivors of vessels they engaged. The war at sea had turned a page.

The Battle of the Atlantic had many moments of drama. The dangers to Allied shipping were substantially increased with the German invention of the schnorkel, which enabled the U-boats to run semi-submerged on their diesel engines, making them difficult to spot. Their tactic of preying on convoys in highly organized wolf packs led to so many Allied ship losses in 1942 that a special ASW base, HMS *Western Isles*, was established on the west coast of Scotland to give naval escort groups a crash course in improving their competence in submarine hunting. It was for good reason that Britain's wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, wrote in 1948, "The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

By mid-1943, the tide of battle in the Atlantic had finally begun to turn in our favour. With the escort groups operating more efficiently, and with our ability to once again read the enemy's coded naval traffic (something denied the Allies when the Germans added a fourth rotor to their Enigma encryption device in early 1942), the path was being cleared for the June 6, 1944 D-Day landings, and the Allied invasion of occupied Western Europe.

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The converted armed transport, RMS *Laconia* as she appeared before the Battle of the Atlantic.





Photo by Brian McCullough

Rolfe Monteith during a 2018 working session with the Canadian Naval Technical History Association in Ottawa.

It is important to remember that in 1939 Canada was primarily an agrarian economy with limited industry and minimal armed forces. The Royal Canadian Navy, not yet 30 years old, went to war with six modern destroyers and a handful of new minesweepers, and fewer than 3,500 men – two-thirds of them reservists. These numbers would swell to 471 vessels of all description, and a personnel roll of close to 100,000 including 6,500 women.

As the war progressed, the RCN also grew in stature as a skilled anti-submarine force, despite experiencing a challenging operational learning curve with ships manned largely by Hostilities Only crews. And we made our mark. Beginning in 1941, Canadian Rear Admiral Leonard W. Murray was placed in command of the Newfoundland Escort Force (reorganized in 1942 as the Mid-Ocean Escort Force), and in May 1943 was appointed Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic – the only Canadian to command an Allied theatre of operations in either of the two world wars. I feel this was the RCN's finest hour.

My memories of my time aboard HMS *Hardy* are fraught with the awareness that, 30 days after I disembarked at the end of December 1943, the ship was hit by a GNAT acoustic torpedo as she was reinforcing the escort for an inbound convoy being attacked by U-boats. HMS *Venus* took off survivors before sinking the hulk on January 30, 1944, but 35 of my former shipmates had lost their lives.

After the war, I would undergo conversion training as an air engineer, and on separate occasions during my naval career would hold appointments in headquarters as Director of Air Engineering, and Director of Marine Engineering. Some 25 years after my retirement in 1970, I got involved with the creation of two important projects to document the technical history of the Canadian Navy. In 1995, the aviation side of the story was written and published as, *“Certified Serviceable” – Swordfish to Sea King: The Technical Story of Canadian Naval Aviation by Those Who Made It So*. The other side of the story as it relates to surface ships, submarines and the role of Canada's naval defence industrial base has become an active, ongoing project of the Canadian Naval Technical History Association, whose newsletter appears in this journal.

My time at sea during the Battle of the Atlantic may have been extremely short, but I was proud to have played my small part in what was a tremendous and arduous undertaking in the name of a just cause. The Allies had suffered terrible losses of ships and men, as had the enemy. Canada alone paid dearly through the loss of 59 Canadian-registered merchant vessels, 1,500 merchant seamen, 27 warships and 2,024 sailors in uniform. It was not what any of us would have wished for, but we did our bit, and victory was ours.

Canada's role in the Battle of the Atlantic was nothing less than heroic. As historian Niall Ferguson wrote so eloquently in his 2002 book, *Empire*: “Without Canadian pilots the Battle of Britain might well have been lost. Without Canadian sailors, the Battle of the Atlantic surely would have been.”

And to that I say, amen.



*Among the many additional highlights of his long and distinguished career in the RCN, Captain (Ret'd) Monteith served as Air Engineer Officer aboard the aircraft carrier HMCS *Magnificent* (CVL-21), as Project Manager for the Canadian Hydrofoil Project, and as Director of Fleet Maintenance. After leaving the Navy in 1970, he emigrated to the UK where he worked with the firm Babcock & Wilcox until 1983, and thereafter as a private consultant, travelling the world on behalf of British industry. He is a former chairman of the British Naval Equipment Association, and an active member of the Russian Arctic Convoy Association.*