

Salute to the Navy's Centennial

World War II – Part 2: Other Naval Engagements



Although the bulk of the effort and resources of the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II was devoted to the Battle of the Atlantic, ships, men and women of the RCN also contributed immensely to the Allied victory in other theatres and tribute is paid to them in Gallery 3 of the Canadian War Museum.

The Fall of France

With the fall of France in 1940, Canadian destroyers found themselves engaged in the evacuation of troops back to England. In the process, HMCS *Fraser* was rammed and sunk by the cruiser HMS *Calcutta* on 25 June. Forty-seven members of the ships company were lost in this tragedy which is recalled in Gallery 3.



Murmansk Medal and Certificate. Courtesy of Col (ret'd) Robert Grogan.

The Murmansk Run

The fastest (but most dangerous) supply route for providing allied support to the Soviet Union was through the Barents Sea in the Arctic Ocean to the Northern port city of Murmansk - known as 'The Mur-

mansk Run'. These convoys were exposed to one of the largest concentrations of German U-boats, surface raiders and aircraft anywhere in the world.

Many of the convoys sailed in winter in almost constant darkness which helped to conceal the ships, but greater amounts of polar ice led to difficult navigation and forced the convoy route to move closer to German-occupied Norway.

The RCN became involved in convoy escorts in October 1943, and from that time until the end of the war Canadian warships participated in about three-quarters of the missions. Canadian ships involved in supporting the convoys included the destroyers *Haida*, *Huron*, *Iroquois*, *Athabaskan*, *Sioux* and *Algonquin*, and nine frigates from Escort Groups 6 and 9. No Canadian ship was lost while escorting convoys on the Murmansk Run.

Layovers in the Murmansk area were brief, and few Canadians went ashore. However, the Russian government paid tribute to Canadian sailors many years after the war by presenting "Murmansk medals" at ceremonies at the Russian embassy in Ottawa. One of the recipients of the commemorative medal, "60 Years of the Victory of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945" was longtime Friend, Col. (Ret'd) Bob Grogan, whose certificate is shown to the left.

The English Channel

During the build-up to D-Day, RCN Tribal Class destroyers were used in strikes against German shipping in the Channel.

During these operations, on 29 April 1944, HMCS *Athabaskan* (G 07) was torpedoed by the German E-boat Class Destroyer, *T-24*. One hundred and twenty-seven of the ship's company lost their lives but 44 survivors were picked up by HMCS *Haida*.

The captain of *Athabaskan*, LCdr John Stubbs, de-

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Gallery 3 – Model of HMCS *Athabaskan*. CWM 19750106-001.

clined to be rescued and swam back to look for more survivors. The sinking of *Athabaskan* is graphically depicted in Gallery 3 with a scale model of the ship.

D-Day

Although still deeply committed to its duties in the North Atlantic, the RCN became heavily involved in preparations for the invasion of Europe. Sixteen Bangor minesweepers and 19 corvettes were initially assigned to the task and they were later joined by the 9 remaining River Class destroyers and 11 frigates. As well, the RCN manned two flotillas of Royal Navy motor torpedo boats which took part in a variety of operations before, during and after D-Day. In all, the RCN provided 109 vessels and 10,000 sailors as its contribution to the massive armada of 7,000 Allied vessels which put to sea on D-Day.



Gallery 3 – Model of HMCS *Caraquet*, a Bangor Class minesweeper. CWM 19700037-001.

The minesweepers swept a safe channel into Omaha beach. The corvettes escorted shipping and artificial harbour components across the channel. *Algonquin* and *Sioux* provided inshore fire support during the landings in which 30 RCN-manned infantry landing craft took part. *Prince David* and *Prince Henry* (sister-ships to *Prince Robert*) participated as Infantry Landing Ships.

The CWM pays tribute to this huge commitment with a scale model of the Bangor minesweeper HMCS *Caraquet* in Gallery 3.

After D-Day, RCN destroyers continued operating in the Channel, attacking U-Boats and harassing German shipping.

The Pacific Theatre

HMS *Uganda* was transferred to the RCN on Trafalgar Day, 21 October 1944 and was re-commissioned as HMCS *Uganda* (C66). She quickly became the pride of the RCN and was the largest and most powerful ship in the fleet. Her first RCN assignment came when she was tasked to join the British Pacific Fleet's (BPF) operational area south of Sakishima Gunto. *Uganda* left Halifax, NS on 31 October 1944 and steamed via Great Britain, Gibraltar, Alexandria, the Suez Canal, and on via Aden and Colombo, Ceylon to Fremantle, Australia, where she arrived on 4 March 1945.

Uganda proved invaluable during operations with the BPF as her radar and aircraft identification capabilities were amongst the best in the fleet. In April 1945, the Task Force was ordered to attack Formosa and for three days *Uganda* and her RN counterparts attacked airfields on Formosa before being redirected back to Leyte Gulf where she joined the US 3rd Fleet and became the only RCN warship to fight in the Pacific Theatre against the Imperial Japanese Navy.

While *Uganda* was involved in operations with the 3rd Fleet, Prime Minister Mackenzie King confirmed that only volunteers would fight against Japan. He narrowly won re-election, largely because of the military vote. *Uganda's* crew was given the op-

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tion of volunteering for service in the war against Japan and cast their individual votes: 61% voted “No”, the same proportion as throughout the rest of the navy.

Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray, VC

In 1940 Robert Hampton Gray was selected as one of 75 candidates for commissioning in the RCN and was one of 13 who qualified as pilots in the Fleet Air Arm. In 1944 he was a lieutenant on HMS *Formidable*. For his brilliant work during the attack on the German battleship *Tirpitz* in Alten Fjord he was Mentioned-in-Dispatches and in July 1945, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for aiding in the destruction of a destroyer in the Tokyo area.

On 9 August, 1945, flying off the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable* he led an attack on Japanese shipping in Onagawa Wan Bay off the mainland of Japan. Furious fire was opened on his aircraft from batteries on the ground and from warships in the bay. Lt Gray selected the enemy destroyer *Amakusa* for his target. He swept in and oblivious to the concentrated fire made straight for the ship. His aircraft was hit and caught fire but he got to within 50 feet of the Japanese ship and released his bombs. *Amakusa* sank almost immediately but Lt Gray did not return.

Lt Hampton Gray was the only RCN recipient of

the Victoria Cross in World War II. In October 1993, his sister, Phyllis Gray Gautschi loaned his medals to the War Museum, and unveiled an impressive painting by the Canadian aviation artist, Don Connolly, depicting the action in which he won the Victoria Cross and lost his life.



Gallery 3 – Finale [Lt Gray’s Attack]. Painting by Maj Donald Connolly. CWM 19880046-001.

Women in the Navy

Throughout the war, women served in the navy as civilian employees and as Nursing Sisters on naval bases on both coasts. During the Battle of the Atlantic, Nursing Sisters staffed two Canadian hospital ships, the CGHS *Letitia* and *Lady Nelson*.

In 1942 the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service (WCRNS) known as WRENS was created, “To Free a Man for Service Afloat” as in their motto. They served in Canada, Washington, DC, New York and Great Britain in many capacities, including administration, cryptography, and intelligence.

When disbanded in 1946 some 7,000 WRENS were serving in their distinctive navy-blue uniform, an example of which, donated by Joan Voller, is on permanent display in Gallery 3. Joan, a former WREN and long-time Friend, and her late husband, Keith (ex-RN) volunteered for many years as guides in the War

HMCS *Prince Robert*

In October 1941 HMCS *Prince Robert*, one of three Canadian Pacific steam ships converted to Armed Merchant Cruisers, had sailed with HMS *Awatea* to carry the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Royal Rifles of Canada to Hong Kong, which fell to the Japanese after a three-week battle. The Canadians suffered many casualties and many subsequently died in Japanese prison camps. In one of war’s poignant ironies, one of the last missions of the *Prince Robert* was to return to Hong Kong after the Japanese surrender to bring home 59 surviving Canadian Prisoners of War to Vancouver.



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Newfoundland and the RCN

Although Newfoundland was not part of Canada in either World War, some 2,900 Newfoundlanders volunteered for service at sea and enlisted in the Royal Navy in World War II and Winston Churchill described them as “the best small boat men in the world”. They sailed on hundreds of vessels in every theatre of war.

Canada recruited 1,160 men from Newfoundland into its navy, army, and air force and, in addition, many women served in the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service.

Museum.

From 1955 to 1968 a women’s component was fully integrated into the RCN. Post-war a WREN Association was formed and after their final meeting in 2005 they presented a commemorative plaque which is now installed in the grassed-roof area of the War Museum

The Royal Canadian Naval Air Service (RCNAS)

Established during World War I, the RCNAS was disbanded following that conflict. However, in the face of the growing U-Boat threat during World War II, and the need for critical air coverage in the mid-Atlantic, the re-establishment of the RCNAS was approved in October 1943 and by February 1944 RCN personnel were manning two Royal Navy escort aircraft carriers, HMS *Nabob* and HMS *Puncher*. Canadians provided a high proportion of aircrew and aircraft technicians to the embarked Royal Naval Fleet Air Arm Squadrons.

Plans for a significant RCNAS presence in the

Corrections to Naval Supplement 2

Two errors in Naval Supplement 2 (November 2009) have been brought to our attention. It was HMS and not HMCS *Itchen*, and HMCS *Magog* was a Frigate and not a Corvette. Apologies for these oversights.

Pacific Theatre were curtailed by the end of the war against Japan. Nonetheless, in December 1945 a permanent post-war RCN Air Branch was approved and remained in existence until the unification of the Canadian Forces in 1968.

Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS)

When the war began few merchant ships were armed, so many were then re-fitted with weapons manned primarily by RCNR gunners, known as Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (or DEMS) ratings. These volunteers completed advanced sea-going naval training and intense courses in gunnery, fire control and aircraft identification.

Typical DEMS weaponry included the 20 mm/50 Oerlikon, Anti-Aircraft gun that is on display in the LeBreton Gallery.

The Naval Centennial on the FCWM Web Site

On the web site, click on “The Navy’s Centennial” button (left-hand navigation bar) for additional related information, including a photo gallery and personal stories (some with audio files).

Clicking on “Publications” (left-hand navigation bar) and then “Facts and Research” displays a list of FCWM-sponsored research papers and facts sheets. Note the fact sheet on Lt. Robert Hampton Gray under “Personalities and Service”.

www.friends-amis.org

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