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In the FCWM Research Paper *Canada's Navy 1910-2010: The Ships*, it is noted that "some of the lesser combatant ships" are omitted. This paper remedies that in part by describing the role of Canadians in coastal fighting craft during World War II.

As an organization, the Royal Canadian Navy takes somewhat of a back seat in this because, as will be seen in the following text, the Canadian participation in these agile craft was conducted in fleet organizations run by the Royal Navy. In a related vein, there is but passing mention of Canadians serving with the Royal Navy on RN small boat missions, such as in the Adriatic.

This paper focuses on the various types of Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) in which Canadians served. "Motor Torpedo Boat" may be an unfamiliar designation due to term the more frequently heard, "PT Boat". The latter, used by the United States Navy for its Patrol Boats (Torpedo), has been popularized by Hollywood war movies, including one touching on the service of former U.S. President Jack Kennedy, *PT 109*.

Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) was the terminology used by the Royal Navy and latterly by the Royal Canadian Navy, for those classes of vessel employed for the same type of fast hit and run raids associated with the "PT Boat".

Overseas Service

In 1942, the British proposed that the Royal Canadian Navy form a British-based flotilla of MTBs, but this was not acted upon due to the lack of such vessels in the RCN inventory. A year later the Admiralty offered to supply and maintain such boats if the RCN would man them. This offer was accepted and two Canadian-manned MTB flotillas of the Royal Navy were formed – the 29th and the 65th.

Notwithstanding the fact that they were manned entirely by RCN officers and men, since these flotillas were part of the Royal Navy they have been largely overlooked in

historical overviews of the Royal Canadian Navy and have thus remained fairly unknown to the majority of Canadians.

The 29th Canadian MTB Flotilla

The 29th Canadian MTB Flotilla was formed in March 1944, and was equipped with 71.5 ft., "hard-chine" craft (angular hull components as opposed to smooth or moulded,) built by British Power Boats at Hythe on Southampton Water. Originally designed as Motor Gun Boats (MGBs), they were modified and re-designated as Motor Torpedo Boats. Driven by three Rolls Royce or Packard V-12 Supercharged 1250 H.P. engines, each with a 2,500 gallon capacity of 100 octane gas, these vessels had an operational radius of about 140 miles while cruising at 25 knots, and a top speed of some 40 knots.



**MTB 459 of 29th
Flotilla**

The 29th Flotilla originally consisted of eight boats (MTBs 459-466) and was later

augmented by three more (MTBs 485, 486, and 491) from the Royal Navy, although the latter were also manned entirely by Canadians.

Most of the Canadians serving in the coastal forces had considerable service experience in small craft with the Royal Navy in the Channel, North Sea, and Mediterranean prior to the formation of the Canadian small boat flotillas.

All Coastal Forces personnel were volunteers and had to undertake special training prior to joining a flotilla. A number of spare officers and ratings were borne at every MTB base, and it became normal for one of these officers to be carried in each boat, making a total complement of three officers - one in command, one navigator, and one for general supervision; plus seven NCOs and ratings (this number grew in the later stages of operations).

MTB Specifications – 29th Flotilla:

Displacement (new & dry) - 47 tons
Added weapons & equipment, & soakage of timber - 55 tons plus
Overall length including 3 rudders - 72' 6"
Beam - 20' 7"
Draught (aft) - 5' 8"
Full Speed - 38 to 41 knots
Armament - 6 pounder gun and two Torpedo tubes
Other weapons - .303 machine gun; .5 inch machine gun; 20 mm and 40 mm guns

The first mission of the 29th Flotilla on May 16, 1944, assigned to boats 460, 462, 464 and 465, was to escort a mine gathering expedition to the coast of France. They proceeded to the designated D-Day beaches in company with two British MTBs, and protected them while volunteers were landed to lift sample mines from the beach defences.

They completed their mission undetected, and returned with the German mines. What was learned from the dismantling of these mines prevented many casualties when D-Day finally came.

Most of the rest of May '44 was spent in company with the 65th Canadian MTB Flotilla and the Canadian *Tribal* Class destroyers marauding up and down the English Channel, intercepting enemy coastal convoys, duelling with German E-boats, luring German destroyers within gun range of the *Tribals*, shooting up escort ships, and torpedoing merchant vessels.

On D-Day, the primary duty for the 29th Flotilla, from the afternoon onward, was the close-in protection of the eastern side of the assault lines and anchorages.

During the early hours of June 7, the MTBs clashed with German E-boats that were out in strength. There were no less than seven encounters during the night, in which the Royal

Navy 55th Flotilla, under LCdr D.G. Bradford, DSC, RNR, and the Canadian 29th Flotilla, under LCdr C.A. Law, DSC, bore the brunt of the fighting.

On July 2, 1944, the 29th Flotilla lost its first boat when MTB 460 struck a mine and was lost along with 10 members of the crew.



German E Boat

During an intense action off Trouville on July 4, 1944, three boats of the 29th Flotilla engaged a number of E-Boats

and damaged two of them before a second flotilla of E-Boats joined the fray. In the confusion of the battle, the German newcomers wound up engaging the first flotilla of German vessels, causing further German casualties. Three, and possibly four E-Boats were sunk in this action. All three Canadian boats were damaged but managed to return home safely to Portsmouth.

MTB 463 was sunk by mines on July 8; four wounded crew were taken off with the rest of the ship's company by MTB 466.

Through the rest of July and until January 1945 saw the Canadian Flotilla in almost continuous action inflicting damage on enemy convoys and their escorts. During this period, MTB 459 was struck by shells from a shore battery and suffered two killed and one wounded. The damage to the boat necessitated that she be beached and abandoned in the area of Le Havre. Recovered later, she was repaired and put back into service.

In a separate action, MTB 464 was holed by gunfire and in imminent danger of sinking but was saved by the quick thinking of Petty Officer F. Walden who patched the hole with a large piece of wood and a turtleneck sweater, which allowed the stricken vessel to be pumped out and kept afloat.

In January 1945, the 29th Canadian Flotilla was transferred to Ostend, Belgium. Shortly afterwards, on February 14, disaster struck when an accidental fire spread rapidly to engulf the boats tied up alongside. Five Canadian and seven British MTBs were lost and many more damaged; 28 Canadians and 35 British sailors were killed.

This disaster signalled the end of the 29th Canadian MTB Flotilla. The remaining boats were turned over to strengthen other Royal Navy flotillas.

(On May 8, 2003, a memorial to remember this tragedy was dedicated in the city of Ostend by the Canadian Minister of Veterans Affairs.)

The 65th Canadian MTB Flotilla

The 65th Canadian MTB Flotilla was equipped with the Fairmile Type "D", 115 ft, hard-chine, pre-fabricated double mahogany hull vessel, whose hull was sub-divided into nine watertight compartments. Driven by Four Packard 12-cylinder 1250 horsepower supercharged patrol engines, the boat carried 5200 gallons of 100 octane gas for a range at maximum continuous speed of 506 nautical miles. Two Ford V-8 auxiliary engines provided electric power.

The 65th Flotilla consisted of 11 vessels – MTBs 726, 727, 735, 736, 743-748, and 797.



Fairmile Type 'D' MTB No. 735

On the night of May 22/23, 1944, the 65th went into action for the first time. Four boats engaged a German convoy protected by E-Boats in the English Channel. Two E-Boats were sunk, but the 65th lost two killed and several wounded in the action.

On July 3, 1944, three MTBs of the 65th attacked a convoy off St Malo, sinking two ships and possibly a third despite receiving considerable damage to themselves.

After more than a year of almost constant action with German E-boats, R-boats and armed trawlers up and down the English Channel before and after the invasion of France, the Canadian 65th Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander J.R.H. Kirkpatrick, DSC, RCNVR, of Kitchener, Ontario, was de-commissioned at the end of the war.

In the course of 464 actions in British home waters (North Sea and English Channel) British, light coastal forces, including Canadian, were responsible for the destruction of 40 merchant ships of some 59,650 tons.

Fairmile Type "D" MTB Specifications

Displacement designed - 85 Tons

Actual displacement - 105 Tons

Overall length - 115 ft

Waterline length - 110 ft

Beam - 21 ft 3 In

Forward draught - 4 ft 6 In

Aft. draught - 5 ft

Full speed - 27 to 34.5 Knots

Armament

4 - 18 in. high level torpedo tubes

1 - 6 Pdr. Mk VII gun

4 - .5 in Vickers machine guns on two twin Mk V (power operated) mountings.

4 - .303 in. Vickers gas-operated machine guns in two twins on bridge wings.

2 - 20 mm Oerlikons

Crew

3 officers, 27 men (varied according to operational requirements).

Personalities

Among the daring band of Canadians who answered the call by serving in Coastal Forces during WWII were many heroic figures. Canadian MTB/MGB aces, such as "Corny" Burke, Douglas Maitland and Thomas Ladner, known as the "*Three Musketeers*" from Vancouver, were joined by others such as James Kirkpatrick, Tony Law, Charles Burk and Tom Fuller.



**Famous Canadian WWII MTB Captains
– Tom Fuller, Tom Ladner, Douglas
Maitland & Cornelius Burke**

Thomas Fuller, of Ottawa, became known as the "*Pirate of the Adriatic*" in recognition of his fearlessness and numerous feats of daring while wreaking havoc among enemy formations in the Aegean, Adriatic and Mediterranean. An unconventional leader, he gave and expected the utmost while often showing a keen sense of ironic humour. He once signed on as a member of his crew the cook of a German U-Boat, who was among survivors he had picked up, to act as the cook for his boat! After the war he served as the Commanding Officer of Ottawa's Naval Reserve Division, HMCS *Carleton*, re-established himself in the family business, Fuller Construction, and was active in benevolent activities such as the Bytown Brigantine youth sail-training organization.

After initial training at HMCS *York*, **Thomas Ellis Ladner** was commissioned at HMS *King Alfred* in Sussex, then appointed to the armed merchant cruiser *Forfar*. Early in December

1940, *Forfar* was hit by a torpedo from the German ace Otto Kretschmer's submarine *U-99* off Ireland. Some 171 died. Ladner was one of only 21 survivors.

In January 1942, he joined the 8th Royal Navy Motor Gun Boat Flotilla, and as captain of MGB 75 carried out night raids on the enemy coast out of Harwich and Lowestoft.

During one raid off Holland, his boat was so badly damaged that he could not make the open sea. He hid behind a buoy in the dark until "things had quietened down", then made his way back to Felixstowe on two engines with a large hole in his bow, taking a shortcut through a minefield to get his injured crew ashore quickly.

In February 1943, with Burke and Maitland, Ladner sailed for the Mediterranean in what was known as "the cowboy flotilla", because its captains were Canadians. Ladner's 99 patrols in the Mediterranean took in the invasion of Sicily, a temporary evacuation from Augusta, Sicily, and landings on the islands of Monte Cristo and Pianosa.

Having harried German and Italian forces throughout the Mediterranean, the trio moved to the Mjlet Channel between Split and Dubrovnik, where on one night they lay in ambush off the narrow entrance to intercept a German convoy of heavily armed coasters, tankers and landing craft. Directed by Maitland in MGB 657, who had "borrowed" a radar set from the Americans in exchange for whisky, they passed information in hushed voices and by hand signals, while the silhouettes of their boats were hidden against the wooded cliffs until the enemy was just 300 yards away.

At 0035 Ladner fired a starshell to illuminate the enemy convoy as the flotilla sped past in line ahead firing broadsides, which sank a small escort vessel and dispersed the convoy in disarray. In the ensuing close range battle, accompanying German E-boats failed to intervene because they were "unable to distinguish friend from foe", letting Ladner and his companions reduce the convoy to a collection of burning hulks.

The Canadians suffered no casualties in the battle, which was described in official reports as the "shrewdest blow that the enemy has suffered on the Dalmatian Coast". Ladner was awarded his first DSC for "gallantry and outstanding service in the face of the enemy, zeal, patience and cheerfulness in dangerous waters, and setting an example of wholehearted devotion to duty".

Home Waters



Fairmile B Class Motor Launch ML 121

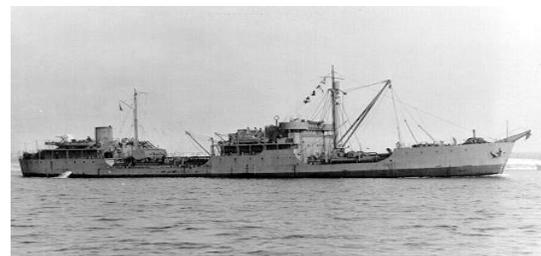
The versatile 112 foot "B" class Motor Launch (ML) was designed in England by the Fairmile Company and the boats were accordingly known as Fairmiles. Eighty were built in Canada, 59 of them in Great Lakes boat yards. Fourteen of the remainder were built on the west coast and seven at Weymouth, Nova Scotia. They were numbered Q 050 to 129.

The Fairmiles played a vital role as escorts in the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and as escorts to convoys between Newfoundland and the mainland. They also carried out A/S patrol, port defence and rescue duties, thereby releasing larger escort craft urgently needed elsewhere. In 1942 it was decided to send two flotillas for the winter to the Caribbean, where the U-boats were enjoying great success owing to a shortage of U.S. escorts.

The 72nd and 73rd Flotillas, of six boats each, left Halifax in mid-December for Trinidad via Boston and other east coast ports. Stress of weather en route forced the 72nd Flotilla to return home after reaching Savannah, Georgia, but the boats of the 73rd Flotilla operated until the following spring out of Miami and Key West

under the (U.S.) Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier.

Their "mother ship", HMCS *Provider*, was stationed at Key West. She also acted as base ship for the Royal Navy's 70th and 78th Flotillas in Bermuda during the winter of 1943-44.



HMCS Provider

Early in June, 1943, ML 053 distinguished herself by recovering, intact, two mines of a barrage laid by U-119 in the Halifax approaches on June 1.

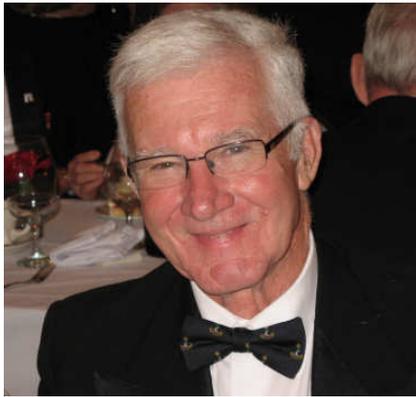
MLs 052, 062, and 063 were transferred to the Free French Forces in February 1943, and stationed at St. Pierre and Miquelon under operational control of the Flag Officer, Newfoundland.

Fairmile Class "B" Motor Launch Specifications

Displacement: 79 Tons
Dimensions: 112' X 17'10" X 4'10"
Speed: 20 Kts.
Crew: 3 Officers, 14 Men
Designed Armament: 3 -20 mm guns

Conclusion

After the war, Coastal Forces suffered much the same fate as they had in 1918. The boats that had given such strenuous service were either broken up or sold off; the MTBs had been built for fighting, and had no discernible peace-time function. (A Fairmile B served for many years as a cadet and naval reserve training vessel at HMCS *Carleton* in Ottawa.)



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Further Reading

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