

“An Obscure Little Organisation”

HMS *Ferret*, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, and the Royal Canadian Navy During The Second World War

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In the annals of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), the Battle of the Atlantic and, more especially, the *North Atlantic Run* hold a particularly important place. It was the convoys between North America and Europe that sustained the war effort from the dark days of 1940 - 1942, right up to the final collapse of Nazi Germany in May 1945. Much has been written on the battle, and thankfully, over the last few decades, the RCN's contribution has been recognized. However, while the *North Atlantic Run* refers to the vital convoys that ran between North America and Britain, the *Newfy-to-Derry Run* is what the escort crews called the dangerous passage from St. John's, Newfoundland to Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the two endpoints have had scant recognition. *Newfyjohn*, as St. John's was affectionately known by escort crews, has received some attention from naval historians, but Londonderry, Northern Ireland has had meagre commentary. Certainly from a Canadian standpoint, the naval facilities at Londonderry were more important to the winning of the Battle of the Atlantic than any other Allied naval base in the Eastern Atlantic.

During World War I, Britain had used several Irish “Treaty Ports” for its anti-submarine war, most notable being Queenstown in Cork Harbour on the island's south coast.¹ However, thanks to a gross miscalculation by the British General Staff and then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, these ports were returned to Ireland in 1938.² First Lord of the Admiralty, and later Prime Minister, Winston Churchill seethed at what he considered this “feckless act,” and in his memoirs suggests that many a life was needlessly lost as a consequence of this “improvident

example of appeasement.”³ As a result, convoys were routed to the north of Ireland to come within the protection of the Royal Navy (RN) and Coastal Command aircraft. This sufficed for the short term, but barring the forcible retaking of the Treaty Ports, the British Admiralty needed a base in Ireland, and their one real choice was Londonderry.⁴

For the first couple of years of the Second World War, the naval base at Londonderry, Northern Ireland was just “an obscure little organisation” called HMS *Ferret*, devoted to converting fishing trawlers into minesweepers and coastal escorts.⁵ It was not until late 1940, as the convoy battles in the Western Approaches became more ferocious, that the Admiralty in Liverpool decided to upgrade the facilities at HMS *Ferret* to accommodate and repair larger warships.⁶ Admiral Karl Dönitz’s U-boats had started venturing farther and farther into the Atlantic with the fall of France and the use of the Brittany coast for submarine bases. In response, more ships were being grouped into convoys and escort was extended west of 22 degrees longitude after British-occupied Iceland was transferred to the Americans in 1941. Northern Ireland now had an important role to play and, as Churchill declared, “[t]here by the grace of God, Ulster stood like a faithful sentinel.”⁷ Escort forces began running between Iceland and Londonderry, and by early 1942, Londonderry forces were taking over convoys that had been escorted as far as the Mid-Ocean Meeting Point by ships of the Newfoundland Escort Force. In the meantime, the United States had entered the fray and were building their own facilities at Lisahally.

In January 1941, almost a year before they actually entered the war on the Allied side, the United States drew up plans to develop ‘Derry as a trans-Atlantic convoy terminal.⁸ On June 30, 1941, three hundred and sixty-two “civilian technicians” arrived in Northern Ireland to begin

construction of a base that would eventually include ship repair facilities, a radio station, barracks, and administrative headquarters, plus ammunition and storage depots.⁹ The base was officially commissioned on February 5, 1942 and by May, the number of Americans in Northern Ireland reached thirty-seven thousand. Ultimately, the US spent five million dollars (US) developing the facilities, the majority being targeted for the repair, maintenance, and refuelling of convoy escorts.¹⁰ The repair facilities proved to be especially important to Canadian forces.

By the summer of 1942, there were seven British, one American, and four Canadian escort groups operating out of HMS *Ferret*.¹¹ The Canadian contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic had continued to grow as American forces were transferred to the Pacific war after Pearl Harbour, and by early 1943, Canadian forces accounted for fifty percent of the convoy escort forces operating in the Atlantic theatre.¹² At the same time, HMS *Ferret* had become the most important escort base in the North West Approaches¹³ with 149 escorts based there, twice the number of those operating out of Liverpool and Greenock combined.¹⁴ Also using Londonderry during this period were the “support groups” and “hunter-killer groups” envisioned by Churchill earlier in the war. These forces were not attached to any particular convoy or escort group. Support groups came to the aid of threatened convoys when needed, going from one to another as directed by the Admiralty. Hunter-killer groups, the most famous led by Captain FJ “Johnny” Walker RN, actively hunted U-boats based on radio intercepts, attack reports, and sightings by Coastal Command aircraft. After D-day, June 6, 1944, the RCN assumed the sole responsibility for maintaining the Mid-Ocean Escort Force and by the end of the year, Canadian ships made up the majority of sea-borne forces utilizing HMS *Ferret*. In February 1945, one hundred and nine RCN warships were serviced at the Londonderry facilities.¹⁵

HMS *Ferret* was an important naval base for the RCN for a number of other reasons; one of the most important was training. As Gilbert Tucker suggests in *The Naval Service of Canada*, Londonderry became an important operational anti-submarine training centre for all three navies based there (RN, RCN, USN), but these facilities played an especially vital part in providing instruction to the minimally trained ships of the RCN.

When war was declared on September 10, 1939, the RCN consisted of 145 officers and 1,674 men, most of whom were thoroughly trained, having spent time in the Royal Navy.¹⁶ In addition, Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) could call on approximately 40 retired officers and 3,684 Reserves.¹⁷ Thus, with the dispatch of the last of the Reserves on the day war was declared, the RCN had just about exhausted its supply of trained men.¹⁸ At the time, this was not a major problem, considering the size of the fleet - six destroyers, five minesweepers, and two training vessels.¹⁹ However, naval headquarters soon started a massive shipbuilding program of corvettes, minesweepers, and patrol craft, and put a mobilization plan in place. The first, tabled on 17 September 1939, called for 5,472 all ranks by the end of 1940, and a further 7,000 by the end of the following year.²⁰ Naval headquarters had anticipated a wartime strength after three years of 1,500 officers and 15,000 men. However, with the fall of France in May 1940, and Britain's defeat a real possibility, this figure was surpassed in half the time. As 1940 drew to a close and the ships of the first of the navy's building programs were coming off the ways in rapid succession, the RCN was looking at having to find trained crews for fifty-four corvettes, twenty-five minesweepers, and an assortment of motor launches - approximately seven thousand officers and men. This number did not include personnel to man new training establishments.²¹ As a result, many Canadian ships were sent into the battle with minimal training, expected to learn on

the job, so to speak. Unfortunately, as more and more new ships were being built, personnel were transferred back to new construction as fast as they could be trained, denuding even veteran ships of trained men. This, and the lack of modern equipment, ultimately led to the crisis during the winter 1943 when the British Admiralty withdrew RCN forces from the Battle of the Atlantic.

Thus, the secret, but highly important feature of the naval facilities at HMCS *Ferret* was the Tactical Training Centre. As the Battle of the Atlantic intensified, the Admiralty endeavoured to stay one step ahead of the enemy in both technology and training, and Londonderry became the main anti-submarine training base in the Eastern Atlantic.²² “Tame” submarines were used to teach ships’ crews the subtleties of tracking submerged U-boats and the “night escort attack teacher” trained them in measures to battle the highly successful *Rudeltaktik* - wolfpack tactic - perfected by Admiral Karl Dönitz’s U-boat commanders. Often, the instruction Canadian ships received at HMS *Ferret* was the only organized training the crews experienced after accepting their ships from the builders in Canada, other than whatever working up they received at HMCS *Avalon* at St. Johns, Newfoundland.

Another crucial contribution to the RCN at Londonderry was the repair facilities. While both the RN and USN had dockyards at HMS *Ferret*, by the Fall 1942, most repair work on Canadian ships was undertaken by the Americans.²³ By the end of 1943, sixty-eight Canadian ships were repaired at the United States Navy Yard in Lisahally. The American repair facilities were not only well equipped, but also efficiently organized to reduce paper work and avoid unnecessary delays.²⁴ The work was completed with a speed and thoroughness that the Canadians appreciated, and included not only running repairs but also refits. This was especially important to the RCN as many of His Majesty’s Canadian Ships (HMCS) came off the ways

either lacking in important rig or with obsolescent fittings. Londonderry was particularly well suited to this task from the RCN point of view as British equipment was more readily available than at the bases and refit yards in North America.²⁵ Gilbert Tucker points out that, from the Canadian standpoint, Londonderry's major importance to the Battle of the Atlantic was its contribution to keeping Canadian warships at sea and reasonably well equipped.²⁶

Like HMCS *Avalon* at St. John's, HMS *Ferret* was more a product of necessity than planning. Denied the use of ports in de Valera's neutral Eire, Londonderry was the most westerly port that was suitable for development as a naval escort base. It had the leanest of facilities at the time, similar to *Newfyjohn*, but in a very short period, it became the most important convoy escort repair, maintenance, and training base in the United Kingdom. This was especially true for the ships of the Royal Canadian Navy, particularly the Newfoundland Escort Force, later designated the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (February 1942). Many were minimally trained and inadequately equipped, and the layovers at HMS *Ferret* provided the opportunity for much needed instruction and upgrading. Further, Canadian escorts appreciated that the latest anti-submarine technology was more readily available at HMS *Ferret* than in *Newfyjohn*, or even Halifax, Canada's main east coast naval base. Without Londonderry, Canada's "Far Distant Ships" would have experienced an even more difficult Atlantic war. For the Royal Canadian Navy, HMS *Ferret* at Londonderry, Northern Ireland, was the most important naval base in the Eastern Atlantic.

¹Joseph T. Carroll, *Ireland in the War Years 1939-1945* (Newton Abbott: Davis & Charles, 1975), p. 25.

²Ibid.

³Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 18th Edition, (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), p. 248.

⁴John W. Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War*, 2nd Edition, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd., 2000), pp. 316-17.

⁵Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), p. 205.

⁶Ibid.

⁷As quoted in Jonathan Barton, *A History of Ulster*, 4th Edition (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. 559.

⁸Ibid., p. 574.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 575.

¹¹Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, p. 207.

¹²Ibid.

¹³John W. Blake, as quoted in Jonathan Barton, *A History of Ulster*, 4th Edition (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. 575.

¹⁴Brian Lacy, *Seige City: The Story of Derry and Londonderry* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd., 1990), p. 240.

¹⁵Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, p. 208.

¹⁶Joseph Schull, *Far Distant Ships*, 2nd Edition (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company Ltd, 1987), p. 1.

¹⁷Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run* 2nd Edition (Markham: Penguin Books, 1990) p. 14.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Joseph Schull, *Far Distant Ships*, p. 1.

²⁰Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, p. 14.

²¹Ibid., p. 27.

²²Samuel Elliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1963), p 104.

²³Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, p. 208.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid