

THE TORPEDOING OF HMCS MAGOG by Herb C. Montgomery, September, 1947 (Courtesy of Edison Stewart)

This story begins in Godbout Bay along the Northern Shore of the Lower St. Lawrence River -- the date is October 14th, 1944; the scene--one of wild dashing about and general confusion.

The ship we proudly called our home was at anchor in the bay and tied up alongside of us was another fighting ship. You see, our home happens to be HMCS Magog, a newly-commissioned frigate in the Royal Canadian Navy. The ship had been rather sadly smashed up that morning when a German acoustic torpedo had blown away sixty-five feet of our stern. The ship tied alongside was HMCS Shawinigan, one of Canada's gamest and oldest fight Corvettes.

Shawinigan was taking what remained of our depth charges and all but a few tons of our fuel for her journey back down the river in search of the submarine which had hit us. The scene was one of wild dashing about and confusion simply because the excitement of the morning's happenings had not yet subsided and secondly, because this work of transferring depth charges and fuel had to be done in the dark without showing any light whatsoever.

Upon close observation, at the entrance to the bay could be seen another Corvette steaming up and down -- guarding the entrance. "What a dull routine for those chaps" we must have all thought; nevertheless, it was a heartening sight to be able to look out that way from time to time and still be able to pick her out .

The wardroom was a constantly changing scene and a good deal more serious atmosphere prevailed than in previous boring evenings spent on this thankless "River Patrol." Shawinigan's captain and a few of his officers had dropped over and the conversation fairly reeked with details of every part of the torpedoing. Shortly, however, a Shawinigan messenger brought the news that the work on deck was complete and everything secured again for sea. A simple handshake from the little Corvette captain relayed to our captain and all of us the sincerity of his statement, when he said, "Good luck from here in."

(It was with deep alarm and profound regret that we read in the newspapers while on Survivors Leave that HMCS Shawinigan had been torpedoed with all hands lost. She had been patrolling the mouth of the river off Newfoundland in search of "our" sub at the time of their tragic end.)

Our boys let go Shawinigan's lines and she steamed slowly out toward the entrance of the bay. Most of us felt more alone than ever now, and all the while we could do nothing but remain at anchor until such time as a tug from Quebec City arrived.

Thinking back to the morning, we all tried to remember the chain of events which led to our being in Godbout Bay. It seemed a lifetime ago thinking back -- so much had happened to keep us occupied. We could all remember the Sydney-Quebec convoy which we and five other escort vessels were taking up river. We could remember the drab morning and that we were on the starboard quarter of the convoy doing the usual irregular zig-zag. We could

remember that Pat and the navigator were on watch and they surely can remember, as could we all, the many dozens of false submarine contacts which would be picked up during a four hour watch. The reason for these alarming reports was generally laid to the extreme temperature gradient in the lower part of the river, and to far outreaching shelves of the Northern Shore. Most we could recall with ironical regret the air of firmness which prevailed throughout the ship inasmuch as anyone on board who thought that would dare venture up the river this far, was insane .

We clearly remembered the terrific roar and the scene of up-churning fountains of water filling the air and we remembered being astonished and temporarily stunned. After picking ourselves up and finding it almost impossible to walk as the ship had taken on a fifteen degree list to starboard, no one quite realized what had happened. Lookouts from astern, dazed, shocked and bleeding about the head – ran screaming for shelter, but in a remarkably short space of time the scene of confusion had changed to one of quite efficient work in searching the ship for possible casualties.

A shout from one of the seamen brought several of us running to the twelve-pounder gun platform aft where the ship had been cut by the torpedo. Sticking out from the twisted wreckage of the gun were the battered legs of one of the seamen. Quick , efficient efforts finally succeeded in lifting the mass of steel long enough for several of us to reach in and pick up the lad and place him on a waiting stretcher. How we must all have thought as we worked feverishly to free the chap – "The one spot on the ship which was most popular for off-duty men to congregate , and only this one lad happened to be standing there that morning!"

Repeated calls from someone searching for a still more casualties brought a small party down amongst the wreckage as far aft as possible and as close to the water as was possible. There would be no stretcher needed here, it would have been like putting a crossword puzzle together –the largest of the pieces floating in the water bore an R. C. N. Life jacket –the jacket bore a number –the only possible means of identification.

The captain's cabin and all the officers' cabins on the top deck were immediately taken over as dressing stations and the wounded lads were taken to one of these cabins for attention. As we had no medical officer on board there was a rushed signal flashed to one of the frigates which carried the doctor for our escort group. Carrying on until the doctor arrived on board, our ship's sick bay attendant did a miraculous job of caring for the lads who had been hurt. Two lads had been working below the waterline aft when the torpedo hit were helped from the water at the end completely covered from head to toe with filthy black fuel oil. They were scarcely able to breathe or see because of this thick coating of oil. These men were rushed to one of the dressing stations for immediate attention.

The ship's whaler, which had been sent away for some lads who had been thrown into the water, now pulled in close to the ship and the still blanketed figure resting on the thwarts bore testimony to all who saw it . Only eighteen years old and just recently drafted aboard the ship, the lad never shaved in his life; it certainly didn't add up, but then, there was work to be done .

The fox'le party was busy forward preparing to be taken in tow by another escort vessel. The bridge, from which the ship is run, was a beehive of activity. It seemed to resemble a small scale library as every confidential secret book and pamphlet had been mustered and placed in their weighted bags ready for dumping into the sea just prior to abandoning ship. The enemy would salvage none of our secret information if we were going down!

A quick, snappy salute from the chief engineer preceded his heartening statement to the captain that the engine room had been shored up and was holding nicely. There was still danger of sinking but it had temporarily been minimised by efficient engine room artificers, stokers and the ship's carpenter, whose specialty on all ships was damage control and the shoring of bulkheads.

Suddenly, the feeling of utter helplessness which we all had felt as we drifted aimlessly about was dispelled as we felt ourselves moving under tow. This would be the test for the engine room bulkheads. The doctor had arrived on board and was frantically busy. All the men had been accounted for and things in general began slowly to steer toward an almost normal course. This was only momentarily, however, as suddenly the towing escort vessel dropped our tow, swung hard to port, rang on full speed and proceeded to drop a pattern of ten depth charges not more than four hundred yards off our port beam.

Helpless as we were all our guns, which could bear, were trained on the spot where the depth charges had exploded, ready and ever so willing to blast away at the first sign of a conning tower or periscope. By this time, however, the U-Boat had likely travelled a safe distance away and left behind her a trail of submarine bubble targets (S. B. T.'s) which would produce on our submarine detecting apparatus an echo similar to the echo of the submarine itself. The fact that two other escorts were busy dropping patterns of depth charges within a radius of about twenty-five hundred yards in opposite directions bore out the theory of the S.D. B. T.'s.

Shortly we were taken in tow again and proceeded toward the bay. A cheery report from the chief engineer that the bulkheads would hold if the weather did, put the ship's company more at ease and once again things began to take a nearly normal course. There was still the tension which had built up inside everyone; there was still the tension which had resulted from the feeling of death in the air, as well as the rotten odour of the provisions blown up from the provision stores aft and scattered all over the ship, but over all was the feeling that there was work to be done and everyone was busy.

Glancing back as we entered the mouth of the bay we could see the masts of the ships in the convoy disappearing over the horizon; and we also caught a glimpse of the senior escort vessel rounding up the group to start a concerted search which we hoped above all else would culminate in the destruction of the sub that got us.

As twilight was coming upon us the cook had commenced to rustle up some steaks and coffee, as in the course of the day's events, food had been our last concern. This time it was a matter of going into the gallery and grabbing, as there was still plenty of work to be done on deck .

The splash of the anchor in the shallow water of the bay told us that our ship was temporarily out of danger. However, there were several on board that were still in grave danger and still others who would never be in danger again. The doctor had done a miraculous job with the facilities at his disposal. Just before dark a twin-engined seaplane was seen overhead and it was soon evident that it intended to come down. At the request of the doctor an emergency signal had been sent to Gaspé requesting aircraft to fly out the injured.

The Diesel cutter was made ready and the critically injured were bundled up in special stretchers and placed in the boat. The aircraft touched down on the water and informed us by light of his intention not to stop his engines, his reason being, no doubt, because of the slight wind which had come up and made the water in the bay quite choppy. It was a tricky job and one well done, manoeuvring the cutter over to the aircraft and securing it to the plane while in the steam of the propellers and being bounced around by the waves.

With the return of the cutter from its mission, a pipe was made by the quartermaster to stand to take the Shawinigan's lines as she was coming alongside. By the time she had secured alongside and a gang-way had been put up, it was completely dark.

Remembering all this was comparatively easy, and as we took another glance out toward the mouth of the bay and saw the corvette still streaming up and down guarding the entrance, we realised for the first time what had happened. We had kept so busy and our minds had been so fully occupied that the reality and adventure of it all had stayed hidden away in our thoughts until now.

The two shrouded figures lying in the after ammunition shelter and the recollection of the C. N. C. life jacket floating in the water, together with the picture of the officers' flats crowded with the injured sailors, had the grim reality of the episode stand out clearly.

After all this vivid remembering of the torpedoing, suddenly we were thinking ahead – thinking of the trip up river to Quebec and wondering what would happen if the weather did not hold. The chief had said that the bulkheads would hold if the weather did. Certainly, the possibility of the remainder of the ship breaking in half after we were under tow remained ever present.

However, this thought along with several others equally as terrifying, remained only as thoughts and were never mentioned aloud, as there was too much work to be done – yes, fortunately, there was always work to be done on a frigate to keep it happy and efficient and typically Canadian.