Healy

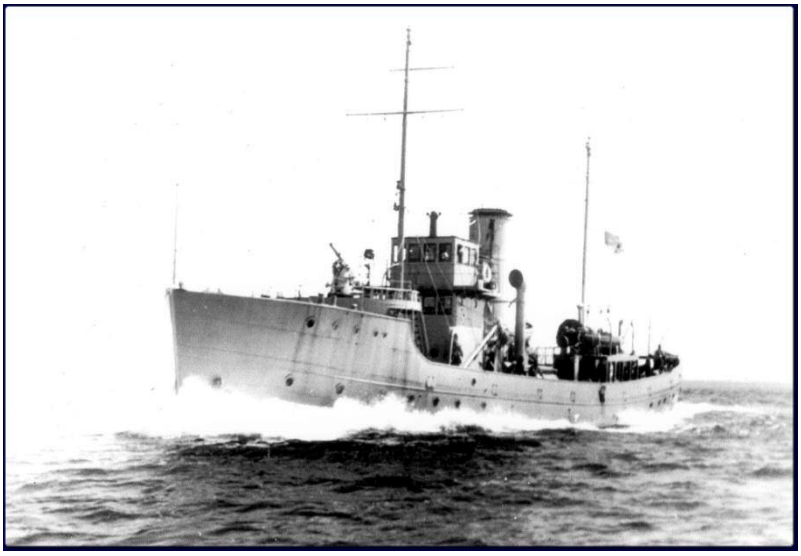
HOLD FOR RELEASE

All in a writer's day: sweeping mines in the North Atlantic

By Sub-Lieut. Frank A Healy, R.C.N.V.R.

Aboard an R.N. Motor Minesweeper in the North Atlantic – A band of veteran British and Canadian sailors aboard these sturdy little ships are playing an important role today in the perilous job of helping the Royal Canadian Navy clear the North Atlantic sea lanes for Allied convoys.

They are the men who play guinea pig in enemy minefields and think nothing more of the risk they take than classing the job as "monotonous".



But to this writer, monotony was displaced by suspense.

Recently these men excelled themselves when they frustrated enemy attempts to bottle up Halifax Harbor with high-explosive mines.

The ships – not much more than half the size of a Canadian corvette – are brand-new craft. They were built in Canadian shipyards for the British government and are manned by Canadian and British crews – more evidence of close Allied co-operation.

I have just completed a day at sea. From the bridge of the flotilla leader, under the command of Lieut. Cdr. Howard Barton, Royal Naval Reserve, I took in the whole show. I saw enough convincing evidence to know why the Allies are winning the Battle of the North Atlantic.

A glowing sun was creeping over the horizon as we slipped quietly from our berth at an eastern Canadian port. The captain came up on the bridge, and with a cup of coffee in one hand and a pencil in the other, began examining the charts before him. When he finished, he knew exactly the area we would "sweep". But he kept that to himself.

It's an eerie feeling, this slicing through mined waters, not knowing when something will happen, just waiting...waiting. But to these men it is day-to-day routine.

The dangers of the patrol were driven home when a life-belt was tossed at me with the curt order: "Keep that on you at all times – it's your best friend". There wasn't a member of the crew not following that advice.

"Hope we see some action today," the captain shouted over the roar of the sea. "We destroyed a couple yesterday, one the day before and expect to find some in today's area."

Since the commissioning of these ships, I was told, the flotilla has been officially credited with destruction of 18 enemy mines without loss of life or limb, an accomplishment which is a tribute to the flotilla commander.

A veteran mine-sweeping expert, Lieut. Cdr. Barton began his role in World War II on the first ships to sweep magnetic mines – in the days when little was known about these treacherous anti-convoy weapons. He took part in the recovery of the first magnetic mine to be discovered and as he puts it himself "have been right through the works".

"To the enemy," he says, "the mine is valuable because of its element of surprise. But as soon as one mine is discovered, we are prepared for more and the element of surprise has lost its value. That's one reason the allies have been able to keep the mine warfare completely under control.

"And I'll say this much," he added as he peered through his binoculars at some distant point, "the navy has been right on top of this mining business since the start of the war."

By this time we were several hours out and approaching our objective – the area we were ordered by the Canadian Navy to concentrate on. Our flotilla ships were close behind in single file like a flock of chicks following their mother hen.

Suddenly there was a command from the captain. It was too quick for me to catch, but the ship slowed as the waters churned about us. The signalman – a young sailor who was the sole survivor of a minesweeper that went to the bottom by a mine in the English Channel with his brother aboard – was on the signal projector.

Lights flashed from ship to ship, and I knew the sweep had begun.

Quickly they went into formation. Spread abreast with about 200 yards of water between each ship, they made an impressive scene. The minesweeping gear was now in the water and we were prepared for come-what-may. Apart from a certain tenseness that seemed to cover the ship, our entrance into the dangerous area showed no effect whatsoever on the crew. The only thing that bothered me was... my heart.

A short while later the First Lieutenant, a Canadian, came up on the bridge and explained just how the sweep worked. He was Lieut. Robert Milligan, R.C.N.V.R., of Hudson Heights, Que., a graduate of Bishop's College School and a Montreal paper company employee before the war.

"We are sweeping for two types of mines," he began. "Our bow sweep takes care of one and the aft sweep looks after the other. If jerry fools us with another kind, then it's just too bad.

"By working in formation like this we set up a large anti-mine area," he continued. "It's all very hush-hush of course, but I can assure you it's most effective."

And Milligan, another veteran mine-sweeper, knows what he's talking about. He has been on loan to the Royal Navy ever since he enlisted back in May, 1941, and has served in four minesweepers – large and small – in all the dangerous war-zone waters.

"We saw lots of action on the Murmansk convoy run," he said. "Our job was to escort and sweep the way for all convoys coming and going from Murmansk. I

can't say much about it, but we saw plenty. We gave them 24-hour service and were seldom away from action stations."

Leaving the "jimmy" to his tedious job, I went below to the ratings' mess and with the hum of the motors buzzing in my ear, talked to several of the men who had been mine-sweeping for many months. Most of them were fishermen before the war. They thought it rather ironic that they were still fishing – but this time for mines.

I toured the ship from stem to stern, all the time glancing over the sea in the hopes of spotting a gusher of water signifying we had exploded a mine. The crew told me that sometimes the explosion shoots the water as high as 100 feet. I could readily imagine what they did to a ship – especially one as small as ours.

My next visit was to the officers' wardroom with the First Lieutenant. With a rum in my hand – "it calms your nerves on a trip like this," he said – he passed on to me some very valuable information. It was confidential, of course, but left me with more knowledge of the task the navy has ahead of itself – and more confidence in its ability.

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Photo: Canadian minesweeper HMCS FUNDY J88