

An Eastern Canadian Port – “Torpedoing delux” was the phrase on the lips of a band of Allied merchant survivors when they landed here recently aboard their rescue ship, a Royal Canadian Navy sub-chasing Motor Launch – and that’s just the kind of torpedoing it was.

Their ships sunk while in a North Atlantic convoy during a hectic but successful battle with a pack of German u-boats in which more than one submarine was sunk or damaged. The survivors were plucked from the water in a matter of minutes, packed aboard the tiny 80-ton ML and treated like the best paying guests in grand hotel. Men of all nationalities, they totalled 78 – no small number for even a large ship to play host to.

With every available inch of space occupied, the 18-man Canadian crew gave up their bunks, clothing and food to the ill-fated seamen and in the words of their commanding officer, “treated them like no survivors have ever been treated – they waited on them hand and foot”.

Held up for security reasons, the full story was told today by Lieut. William Grand, R.C.N.V.R., of Toronto, the ML’s commanding officer.

“We were stationed at the front of the convoy,” Grand said. “Suddenly we were attacked by a pack of U-boats. Within 40 seconds of each other, three ships were torpedoed. That called for quick action by the escorts.

“I made a 180-degree turn and started in towards the convoy,” he continued, “trying to spot one of the subs. Then we were signalled by the senior escort officer to concentrate solely on picking up survivors.

“The last ship to be hit was the first to start sinking, so we headed for it. We figured its crew would have less chance than the others because they had time to get only one life boat away.”

Grand told how the water was spattered with struggling men fighting to keep to the surface. But the sea boat from the merchant ship picked up 21 of them. The ML pulled alongside and took them aboard one by one. The job was completed in less than five minutes.

“Then we sped to the second ship which by this time had started to sink,” Grand continued.

“They too got only one life boat away and it gathered up 29 of the crew. About five of that crew drowned before we could reach them, but we got the life boat alongside and hauled them over the side. A few were injured, but none seriously.

“By this time the last ship – and the first to be hit but the last to sink – had completely disappeared but the crew had released two life boats which were gathering up the crew. We took 28 aboard the same way as the others. About five were also missing from this crew.”

Then, with the ship loaded down and so crowded the crew had to crawl over the survivors to move around, the ML patrolled the area, dodging pieces of wreckage in a search for any survivors still afloat. The convoy had gone on ahead.

“When satisfied we had not missed any,” Grand said, “we headed for the nearest port. To keep the men from freezing, the crew gathered together all their blankets and spare clothing and wrapped them around the survivors. We huddled as many as possible into the engine room and wheelhouse to keep them warm. We even packed some around the funnel.

“We ran into some difficulty when a few were afraid to go below for fear of another sub attack. Most of them had been torpedoed before but nevertheless they were pretty unnerved.”

Grand could not say enough for the way the crew handled their charges. One of the survivors – a Greek petty officer – had been torpedoed three times but, he told Grand through an interpreter, “this was the best yet”.

The commanding officer gave special praise to his First Lieutenant, Lieut. William J. MacKay, R.C.N.V.R., of Rothesay, N.B., by telling of the personal interest he took in making the men comfortable.

“MacKay had his own duties to look after,” he said, “but the cook was having such an awful time trying to feed the survivors that MacKay went into the galley and helped whip up a meal. He won their undying gratitude.”

When the men were landed ashore they were met by a staff of medical men and ambulances. They said goodbye with tears of thanks in their eyes and all agreed – most of them in broken English – that it wasn’t so bad having ships sunk from under you when you were “torpedoed delux”.