

NEW LEAD TO MORDEN ACTION STORY FORWARDED AUG. 7 BUDGET

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A British Port – the full, dramatic story was told today of how the Canadian Corvette, H.M.C.S. “MORDEN”, won awards for three of its crew members when she rescued the crew of a torpedoed merchant freighter and salvaged a valuable motor launch from its cargo deck. Time and place of the action were not revealed.

The rescue resulted in Lieut. Douglas Watson, R.C.N.R., of Westmount, Que., and Timmins, Ont., Morden’s First Lieutenant, being awarded the Member of the British Empire Medal. Lieut. J.J. Hodgkinson, R.C.N.R., of Verdun, Que., and St. John’s, Nfld., the commanding officer, and Chief Petty Officer Howard English, R.C.N.R., of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., were Mentioned in Despatches.

In an interview, Morden’s crew told how they rescued 102 survivors, salvaged the 80-ton motor launch and gear from the sinking ship and put a skeleton crew aboard the ML to pilot it safely to Gibraltar – a hazardous, 300-mile trip through storm-tossed waters. The action resulted from an enemy aircraft attack on a huge convoy which Morden was helping to escort.

Not long ago Morden was said to be the champion survivor-carrier of its class in the entire United Nations navies with a record of 357 shipwrecked persons plucked from the sea during the past year.

The 10,000-ton merchant freighter fell out of the convoy after a direct hit by an enemy bomb and Morden was ordered to stay by and escort her to the nearest port. Later, when it became apparent the freighter would sink, the order was given to abandon ship.

The entire crew of 102 men left the disabled ship in lifeboats, made their way to the escorting corvette and were taken aboard. So accustomed to picking up survivors, the crew considered this part of the job “mere routine”. As leading Stoker Walter Mills, R.C.N., of Halifax, put it, “we’ve played host so many times now that we didn’t bat an eye when they came aboard.”

The skipper called for volunteers from the corvette's crew to form a party to board the sinking ship and release three MLs being carried as deck cargo "and of considerable value to the navy."

"Sixty-nine men volunteered but only 13 of Morden's crew were picked for the risky job," Watson said. "With Lieut. Gentles (Lieut. Royal Gentles, R.C.N.V.R., of Toronto) [Note: photo at left] and three of the freighter's officers, we boarded the ship to cut adrift the three MLs.

"The lashings of the foremost and centre MLs were cut adrift but the after ML was left as the bomb had pierced the bottom."

Their job completed, the boarding party returned to their motor life boat to go back to the Morden, but a scramble net became entangled in the propeller and for a few moments the men were in danger of being sucked down by the freighter. Every man grabbed an oar and in the words of Leading Seaman Wright Evoy, R.C.N.V.R., of London, Ont., "we just rowed like hell."

"I wasn't alarmed until we returned to the lifeboat," said Able Seaman Bob Reaume, R.C.N.V.R., of Windsor, Ont. "When the scramble net was cut away, each man grabbed an oar and we pulled so hard to get away I thought they'd break."

Leading Seaman Charles Cluff, R.C.N., of Victoria, and Telegraphist Harry Taylor, R.C.N.V.R., of Gregg, Man., praised Lieut. Watson's work in getting the lifeboat away in time.

"The jimmy (Lieut. Watson) jumped back aboard the freighter and cut away the net, which was entangled in the propeller," said Cluff. "Then he slid back to the boat on a lifeline. Everybody felt much better."

When the boarding party returned to the corvette, a salvo of gunfire was shot at the freighter's water line to prevent her from rolling over. As she disappeared beneath the surface, the two MLs remained afloat. One was beyond salvage, but the other seemed to be in good condition.

They decided to man the one ML and head for Gibraltar. The crew consisted in part of Lieut. Watson, Chief Petty Officer English; Able Seaman Evoy; and Signalman Joe Schacter, R.C.N.V.R., of Regina.

“We stored up with corned beef, sardines, hardtack and water from Morden,” Watson said. “Fuel shortage was the chief worry, and speed had to be reduced several times to avoid smashing the bows in the heavy sea. She was also making water in the bilges. But we carried on in the wake of the corvette.”

The 300-mile voyage took the crew 42 hours during which time they averaged less than a few hours sleep a day and put up with far more than the usual hardships to be found in a tiny ship at high sea.

During this first night the wind and sea increased, and because of the small reserve of gasoline, they could not make more than eight knots. The ML’s pumps were kept in constant use to drain the leakage caused by the damage she had received by the heavy pounding of the sea.

“When we secured alongside Morden in Gibraltar Harbour we had only 40 gallons of fuel left,” Watson said. “But despite the hardships – bad eating conditions, little sleep and considerable buffeting – all members of the crew were of the greatest help.”

In his official report, Morden’s skipper highly praised the efficient work of the entire crew but gave special mention to Lieut. Watson and the nine-man ML crew.

“They were without hot food or drink for 45 hours as it was impossible to keep anything on the galley stove,” Lieut. Hodgkinson said. “In addition to the pounding they had received, they had been subjected to rain and wind. Also owing to damage received, the decks of the ML leaked water and spray so there was never a dry spot at any time.

“However,” he added, “all on board were of the highest spirits on the completion of the trip.”