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C. Anthony Law (1916–1996): Official War Artist

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Obituary

C. Anthony Law (1916-1996)

Official War Artist

Laura Brandon

Commander Anthony Law, DSC, RCN, who died on 15 October 1996 in Halifax, was one of Canada's most notable naval Official War Artists of the Second World War. He was unique in that he was a serving naval officer throughout the conflict and in the period after the war. He retired in 1966. During his long and distinguished career as a naval officer he was also a professional artist.

As a young man in the early war years, he served on a number of Motor Torpedo Boats in the English Channel, and was involved in the action against the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in 1942. In this period he still found time to paint, usually when ashore during refits. In 1943, for example, he received a temporary assignment which enabled him to record some of Canada's more notable vessels including HMC ships *Haida*, *Chaudière*, *Huron*, and *Restigouche*. Within the art collection of the Canadian War Museum are also to be found some exuberant sketches of his shipmates, the vessels he served on, and the ports he visited during this period.

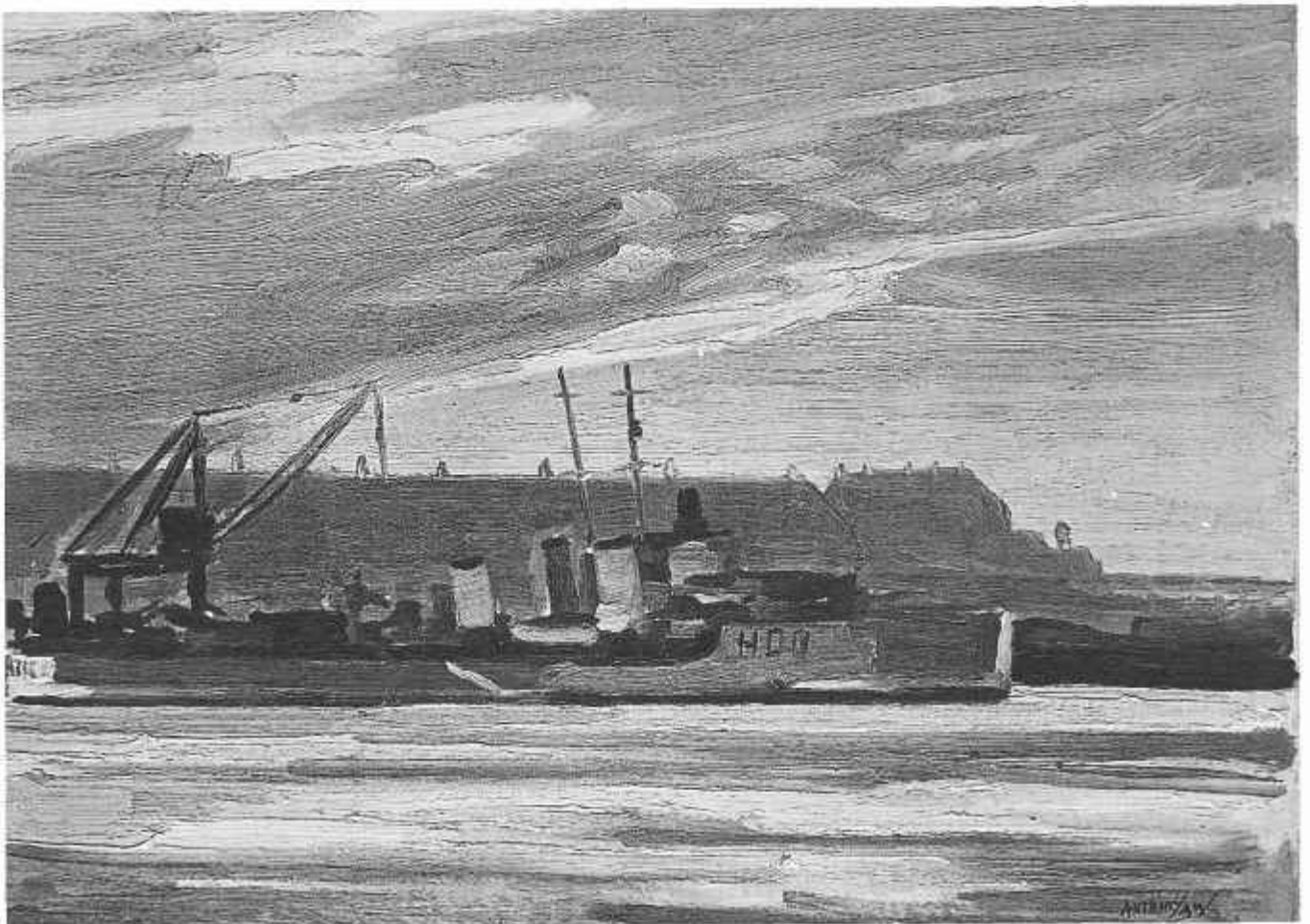
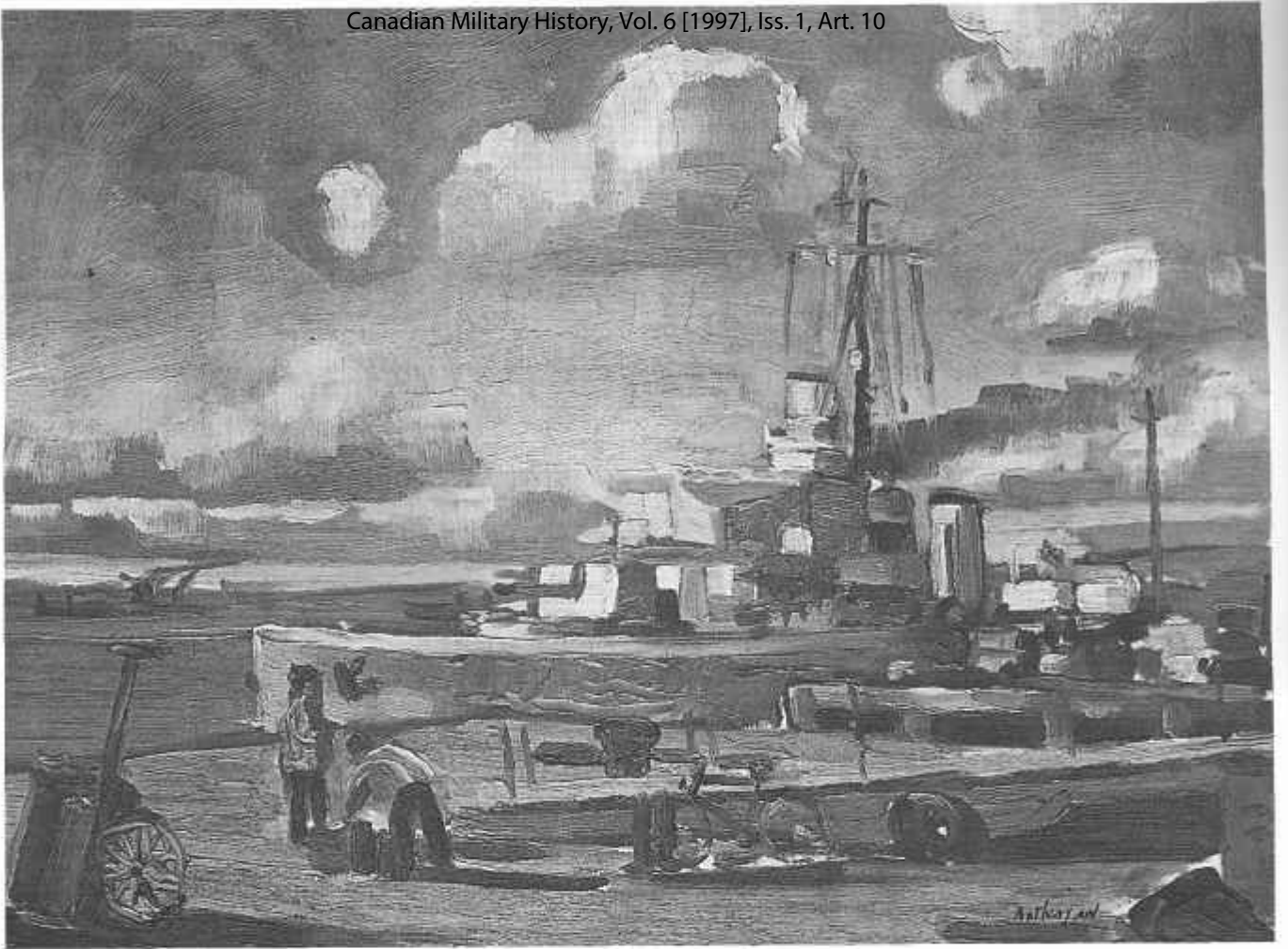
The 1943 assignment most likely came about through the intervention of Vincent Massey, then the Canadian High Commissioner in Great Britain, and one of the most energetic proponents of a war art programme. As early as 1942 he was writing about Law's art to the Director of the National Gallery of Canada, H.O. McCurry: "Although the real scheme for Canadian war artists is still to be organised there are, as you

know, two or three people painting activities among our services here.. There is a young officer named Law, who was an art student before the war, who has produced some very striking canvases in the few hours he gets away from his motor torpedo boat in the Channel."¹

Law's response to how he painted the war at sea was recorded in an interview he gave to the *Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph* in December 1943. When asked how he could recall subjects clearly after periods of heavy action, he responded in some detail:

Certain subjects, phases of battle, for instance, form unforgettable scenes in one's mind. Such as lovely designs of star shells, flak and the horrors of war, ships sinking or on fire. Highlights of action sometimes cannot be forgotten for a long time. I remember a certain night when we met a large enemy convoy heavily escorted. They put twelve star shells into the sky that was looking so beautiful. It was just like the 24th of May. That was the subject of my painting showing our boats in the middle of the night, with all the details shown because of the brilliant light coming from the star shells. And as the battle was progressing, dawn broke east and we could see the enemy convoy ships silhouetted against the horizon. That was a scene that I can still see today in my mind. It was simply unforgettable. And it was easy to reproduce it on the canvas.²

The painting described is likely that depicting the action against the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* referred to earlier.



Right: *Survivors, Normandy, Off Le Havre.*

(Canadian War Museum CN 10310)

Opposite top: *HMCS Chaudière Portsmouth Dockyard.*

(CWM CN 10269)

Opposite bottom: *HMCS Restigouche, Evening, (On the Tynej.*

(CWM CN 10282)



But the artist's most intensely felt and memorable experiences occurred during the last year of the war. Seven years before he died, Tony Law published an account of the 29th Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla (which he commanded from 1944-45) entitled *White Plumes Astern*. The story is one of remarkable camaraderie and courage. In the pages of Law's book the dangerous realities of coastal warfare are vividly described, as are the men who experienced it. The writer's great love of the sea and deep affection and respect for the men and ships with whom and in which he served is evident on every page. Their adventures were many and he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his service during this time. Nevertheless, the abrupt and sudden demise of the Flotilla was probably the most searing experience of the war for him. As he related in his memoirs:

[Commander Kerr] took me up to his room, poured out a stiff gin, and handed it to me silently. Senior officers do not ordinarily offer drinks to their juniors early in the morning, and my heart began to pound in dreadful apprehension. Quietly and without circumlocution, he gave me the painful tidings. At 1630 on 14 February 1945, the 29th Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla had been destroyed by fire in the Ostend harbour. [The Commander's] words fell upon me like a sentence of death. I found myself breathing hard, with every muscle in my body taut, and my throat was choked with the horrible hurt.³

Twenty-six lives were lost in what is considered to have been the greatest disaster in the history of Coastal Force. A fire had broken

out in one vessel which had ignited the gasoline and ultimately caused the on-board torpedoes to explode. It is likely that Law's appointment as an Official War Artist shortly after this tragic event was the result of the loss of his ship and flotilla. It is also probable that his sense of loss influenced his choice of subject matter and the mood of his paintings. Certainly he was soon composing pictures that record the decommissioning of Canada's corvette fleet. *Graveyard, Sorel, P.Q.* (10266) (see back cover) is one such example. A special melancholy pervades the picture, enhanced by its dominant colours of purple and yellow, which are symbolic of Easter and of sacrifice.

When one reviews the many other paintings of similar subjects from this period one is struck by the quality of sadness in them, and one is hard pressed not to assign some portion of this element to the tragic end that preceded their composition. While earlier pictures painted before the disaster such as *Windy Day in the British Assault Area* (10314) (see back cover) are filled with *joie de vivre* and a youthful confidence, the later ones featuring Motor Torpedo Boats often focus on adversity, tragedy, and the fickleness of nature. One, *The Gale of Hurricane Force on the Normandy Beach* (10264), details the destruction wrought on landing craft and the Mulberry artificial harbour by a terrible three-day storm which began on D-Day plus 13, June 19. *Survivors, Normandy, off Le Havre* (10310) records the rescue operation after a sister vessel was blown up. The work is characterized by the violent red-gold



The Gale of Hurricane Force on the Normandy Beach.

(CWMCN10264)

flames of the burning ship which reflect off the water and onto the wounded sailors. In total, Law contributed 29 large paintings and 75 oil sketches to the official record of Canada's navy during the Second World War, a collection now housed at the Canadian War Museum.

A distinguished postwar naval career included an appointment as second-in-command of the Arctic patrol ship *Labrador*.⁴ The artist's retirement featured active volunteer support for a number of arts organisations including the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery. A series of exhibitions of his paintings, some in partnership with his artist wife, Jane Shaw, rounded out a busy artistic career. All this notwithstanding, Tony Law's chief legacy is to be found in his paintings that record the deeply felt and observed experiences of a life fully lived.

Notes

1. Vincent Massey to Harry McCurry, 14 August 1942, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Correspondence with War Artists, 5.42.L, copy in Canadian War Museum Artist File, Anthony Law.
2. Quebec *Chronicle-Herald*, 11 December 1943, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Artist Files, Anthony Law, copy on file in Canadian War Museum Artist File, Anthony Law.
3. C. Anthony Law, *White Plumes Astern* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 1989), p.161.
4. For more information on HMCS *Labrador* see Eric M. Fernberg, 'A Tough Little Boat: The Pogo - HMCS Labrador's Hydrographic Survey Launch,' *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1996, pp.71-76.

Laura Brandon is the Chief Curator at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.