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Roger Sarty

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Admiral Kingsmill and the Early Years of the Royal Canadian Navy

Part III

Roger Sarty

Following is the fourth document in a series assembled to support the creation of a plaque in honour of Admiral Kingsmill by the Ontario Heritage Trust. The plaque is located at his burial place, Emmanuel Anglican Church Cemetery, Portland, Ontario, near the location of Kingsmill's summer home on Grindstone Island, and was unveiled in a ceremony on 15 May 2010. Part I of this series appears in Vol.19 no.1 (Winter 2010), pp.75-80 and part II in Vol.19 no.2 (Spring 2010), pp.76-80.

Document 4

Admiral Kingsmill's review of the U-boat threat and the development of anti-submarine defence measures on Canada's east coast in 1916 to 1917

Kingsmill to Secretary of the Admiralty, 22 November 1917 (Library and Archives Canada, Record Group 24, Volume 3831, file NS 1017-10-1 part 1).

Editor's note: Here is Kingsmill's blow by blow account of the development of the Canadian navy's east coast anti-submarine flotilla in the critical year from November 1916 to November 1917. During that period the u-boat threat to Canadian waters became much more pressing in the wake of U-53's pioneering transatlantic mission of October 1916 in which she destroyed five Allied merchant vessels off the coast of New England. The memorandum begins with the British Admiralty's advice in November 1916 that Canada should triple the strength of its coastal patrol of 12 small steamers. Yet, as Kingsmill explains, Canada had no resources; neither did Britain, which soon faced a renewed U-boat offensive off the west coast of the British Isles. The memorandum records the resulting tensions between the Canadian and British naval authorities, and the measures they managed to concert, primarily by resorting to construction of anti-submarine craft in Canadian shipyards.

The efforts described in the memorandum laid the groundwork for the rapid expansion of the Canadian anti-submarine flotilla, largely with the Canadian-built craft, to a force of some 130 vessels crewed by 5,000 personnel in 1918. The British answers to the pointed questions Kingsmill poses in the last part of the document about the level of the threat to Canada and the specific defences required – British signals intelligence indicated a strong possibility that large u-boats would come to North American waters as early as the spring of 1918 – triggered the all out push for expansion. As it happened, the expanded force deployed barely in time to strengthen merchant ship convoy defences against three large u-boats that hunted in Canadian waters in August and September 1918.

The memorandum is a good example of Kingsmill's plain speaking with British naval authorities in defence of Canadian interests and those of the new Canadian navy despite his 39-year career in the British service.

Secret.

From Director of Naval Service of Canada.
To Secretary of the Admiralty, London,
S.W.I.

- 22nd November, 1917.

It is requested that the following may be laid before the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty for their consideration.

It is desired to point out that the Naval Policy of Canada has never been clearly defined, nor has the Imperial Government ever clearly advised the Dominion Government as to what the Admiralty expected of the Department of the Naval Service of Canada in the way of offensive or defensive measures. The Department, therefore, desire to lay before Their Lordships the situation as it now is, and to draw attention to several points that are not clearly defined as regards expansion, and on which advice is asked:-

In November, 1916, a telegram was received from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 11th November, advising that the patrol of Newfoundland

and the Canadian Coasts was considered inadequate, and suggesting that the force should be increased to thirty-six vessels, and at the same time offering to send an officer to assist in the organization of such patrol, and in procuring the necessary vessels, etc., etc. This telegram was no doubt sent after the despatch of a letter, M.09462/16, dated 7th November, 1916, from the Secretary of the Admiralty to the Governor of Newfoundland, and which is a reply to his letter of the 25th October, No.47344.

To the telegram of the 11th November, the Canadian Government replied in the following terms on the 18th November:-

“Canadian Government notes that Admiralty consider that present twelve vessels are insufficient means against serious attack on trade on these waters and that thirty-six vessels are considered necessary.

“It is desired to point out, however, that in accordance with wishes of Admiralty every possible trained seaman has been sent over to England, whilst active recruiting is

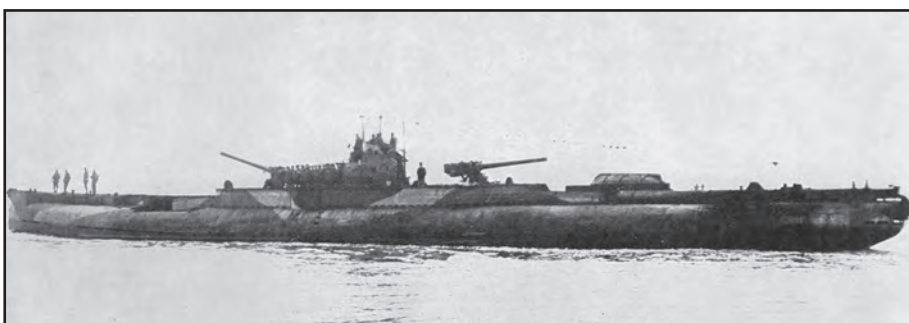
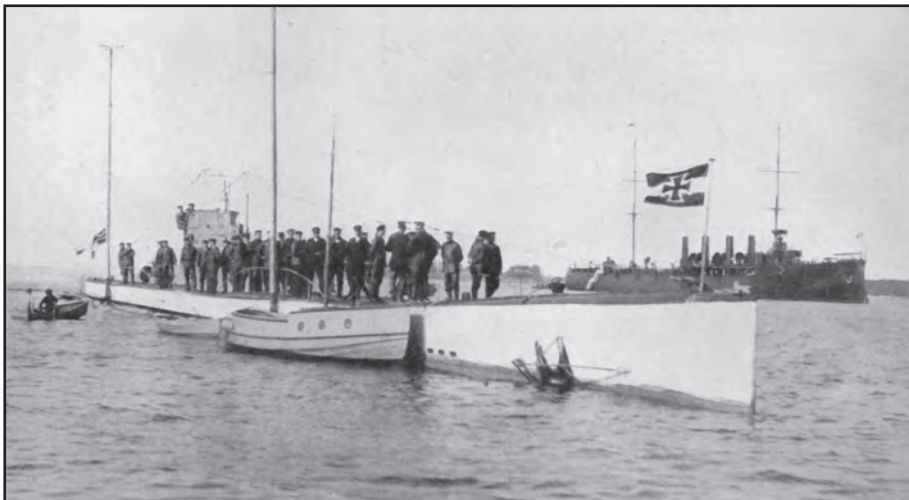
now being carried on for men to serve overseas in the Royal Navy. Further, when Canadian Government was disposed to build destroyers early this year Admiralty did not encourage idea.

“Representative of War Office has recently been allowed to purchase or charter in Canada a number of vessels which might have been useful for patrol work, although number of such in Canada is strictly limited.

“As danger to Admiralty Store transports and Canadian trade in near future from enemy submarines appears to be growing serious, Canadian Government considers adequate protection should be accorded by Admiralty.”

and on December 28th, 1916, the following was sent:-

“Secret. My advisers desire to call attention to the telegram from Admiralty through Colonial Secretary



Top: U-53 photographed during its visit to Newport, Rhode Island on 7 October 1916. The United States was still neutral and the visit was intended to impress the Americans with the power and transatlantic reach of the German submarine fleet. The next day the u-boat captured and sank five merchantmen, three British, one Norwegian and one Dutch. US destroyers were present but because of American neutrality were unable to do anything but rescue the crews and passengers of the ships.

Bottom: U-155 (the ex-Deutschland, a mercantile type submarine that had been heavily armed with 15 cm guns, torpedoes and mines) operated off Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and the northeastern US from August to October 1918. She laid 14 mines in the southern approaches to Halifax on 17-18 September, which did no damage. Several broke loose (and were thus automatically rendered 'safe') and were recovered by Canadian fishermen who each received a \$25 reward from the Canadian navy.

Dazzle-painted merchantmen put to sea in convoy from Halifax in 1917 or 1918.

of 11th November last and to their reply to Colonial Secretary of 18th November as well as their further cables of 7th and 15th December to none of which any reply has been received. In May last Minister of Naval Service suggested to Admiralty advisability of his Department constructing three torpedo boat destroyers at Canadian Vickers yards but Admiralty's reply was regarded as discouraging the proposal. In early months of the war my advisers requested advice from Admiralty as to advisability of Canada undertaking to supplement naval defence of Empire and reply received indicated Admiralty view that such action was unnecessary and that Canada's efforts should be concentrated on provision of military forces. Under these circumstances the Admiralty's intimation that we must provide against danger of submarines on our coast is very serious especially as many boats suitable for patrol work were acquired by War Office in Canada in September last and the recruiting for overseas forces in Canada has denuded this country of most suitable men for such purpose, and every available gun has been sent to the British Government. My advisers would be grateful for immediate reply to unanswered telegrams above mentioned and for a precise statement of the Admiralty's ability to provide against danger of submarines on our coast. If responsibility for protection of our coast against submarines must be undertaken by Canadian Government immediate action is imperative and it is absolutely essential that the officer asked for in despatch of 15th December should be sent immediately."

to which, on the 10th January 1917, the following reply was received:-

Department of National Defence (DND) photo CN-6998



"Your telegram 29th December. It is recognized by Admiralty that situation is one of considerable difficulty for your Ministers but they greatly regret that dearth of small craft at home makes it impossible to provide any patrol vessels from United Kingdom for service in Canadian waters. Need for such craft however is very urgent and although it is desirable to build some at once it is still more necessary to make use of any which are or could be made available immediately. Patrols in home waters are composed mainly of trawlers low speed and general type of vessel required is one of good sea-going qualities capable of carrying twelve-pounder quick-firing gun and wireless telegraph installation smaller guns being unsuitable. It is suggested by Admiralty that your Ministers should consider whether suitable vessels of similar type could be obtained from whalers and sea-going fishing vessels with auxiliary motive power. Officer with practical experience of auxiliary patrol at home will be sent to Canada immediately and will render all possible assistance to your Ministers in organization of service generally. Will reply as soon as possible as regards proposal to take over ships being built for Norwegian owners."

In reply to this, on the 16th January 1917, the Dominion Government sent the following:-

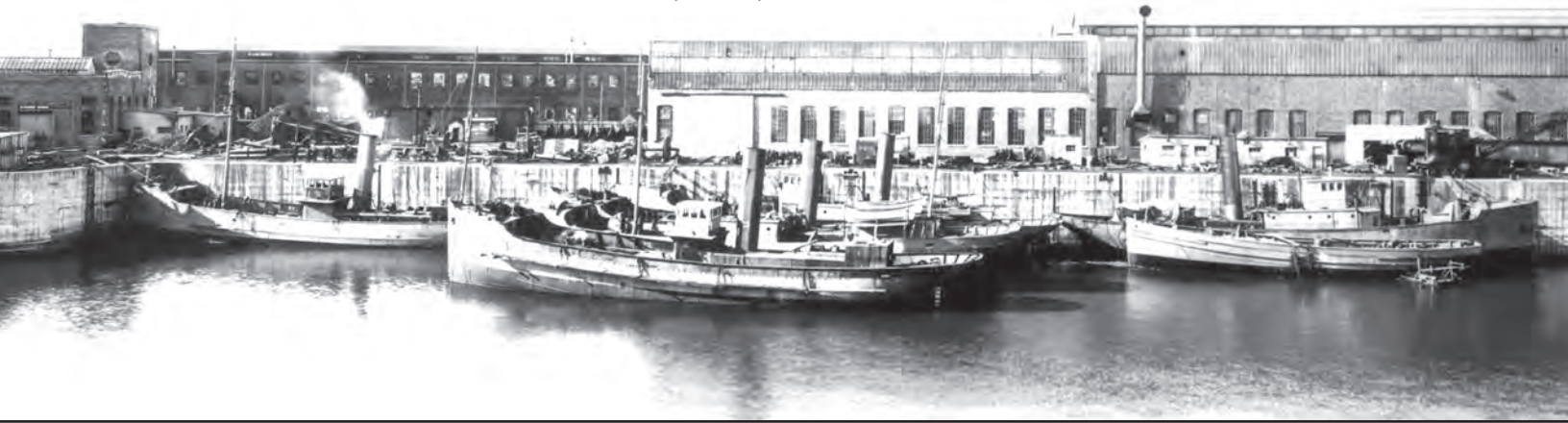
"With reference to your telegram 10th January and 11th November

every effort is being made to secure either by purchase or building the vessels suggested in latter. Naval Department has no reserve of trained seamen or guns as all spare guns have been transferred to England. Can Admiralty provide requisite number of guns and sufficient trained men for each with instructional petty officers and armourer ratings Stop RAINBOW is approaching time when extensive refit absolutely necessary, if she were paid off number of trained men would be available and four 12-pdr. guns, also six 4.7 guns would be liberated for defence of merchantmen."

and on the 27th January a further telegram from the Prime Minister to Sir Edward Carson, marked secret, was sent, stating what we were doing to get the thirty-six vessels suggested, and pointing out our poverty as regards guns, and asking the First Lord's personal interest, as the responsibilities placed upon the Canadian Government in this respect were quite unexpected, having reference to previous advice given that danger was potential, etc. In reply, a telegram dated 30th January was received, stating the arrangements that would be made as to supply of guns.

On the 5th February 1917, a telegram was received as follows:-

"5th February. Shipbuilding. With reference to your telegram 8th December view of Admiralty is that Canadian resources should immediately be utilized for output of



Anti-submarine trawlers fitting out at either Montreal or Quebec City in 1917, or more likely, 1918.

patrol boats that is steel vessels of trawler type with as good speed as can be obtained on the dimensions and wooden steam drifters say thirty-six of the former and one hundred of the latter. Admiralty would be glad if Canadian Government could undertake this programme and if so could state as early as possible by what date vessels could be constructed. These vessels are additional not only to the thirteen already in commission but also to the twenty-two others for the building or purchase of which your Ministers are understood to be arranging. Designs are being prepared of vessels considered most suitable and will be sent for the guidance of your Ministers if they decide to undertake work. It is understood that information in Canada as to designs and costs of drifters which might be built has already been collected by the Imperial Munitions Board.”

and replied to in the following terms on the 8th February 1917:-

“Your cable fifth respecting ship building. My advisors are prepared to undertake proposed programme for His Majesty’s Government and will proceed immediately with orders for the construction of thirty-six steel vessels trawler type with as good speed as can be obtained on the dimensions, and one hundred wooden steam drifters. They will

avail themselves of all information as to design and cost which has been collected by the Imperial Munitions Board but they hope that detailed designs and all necessary information not procurable here will be forwarded with the least possible delay.”

From then on, several telegrams were sent, but in none of them was there any hint that the Admiralty intended these vessels were for use in the Western Atlantic, or were to form part of the Newfoundland and Canadian Patrol. The following points out that the building of ships or vessels in Canada formed part of a general scheme to increase output, but speaks of two programmes:-

“London, February 12th 1917. With reference to my telegram February 5th. There has been recently adopted a scheme for securing as much as possible of prospect of output of shipbuilding yards of United States for His Majesty’s Government. For the purpose of supervising arrangements John Esplen Sons and Swainson Consulting Engineers, has been attached to Department of Controller of Shipping and negotiations in America are being conducted under his general direction by James Esplen in conjunction with Cunard Company. Shipping Controller is anxious to extend scope of this scheme to Canada for my securing as large an output as possible of

suitable steamers from Canadian yards which would be property of and paid for by His Majesty’s Government and James Esplen is being instructed to place himself in communication with Imperial Munitions Board and supervise arrangements in concert with them.

“This programme is not concerned with Naval construction dealt with in my telegram February 5th above mentioned but only with mercantile shipping.

“From international standpoint the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs recently advised that there was no objection to taking over ships now building for Norwegian owners.”

The penultimate paragraph led us to suppose that information would be received as to the allocation of the drifters and trawlers referred to as “Naval construction”, but nothing was heard until the arrival of Admiral Sir C. Coke with two officer overseers on his staff.

Apparently before leaving England, the Commodore was informed that the drifters and trawlers mentioned in telegram of the 5th February 1917, were for operation on the Atlantic seaboard, and his statement to that effect was the first that was known here that these vessels were to be utilized on these coasts, nor have the Department yet heard from the Admiralty direct that this was ever their intention.

There were certain arrangements made as to manning these drifters and trawlers which led the Department to suppose they were intended for other waters and several questions as to the disposal of the drifters asked by telegram still remain unanswered.

In August, 1917, Commodore Sir C. Coke, R.N.R., returned, and Acting Captain J.O. Hatcher was proposed as a relief, and his services were gladly accepted on the understanding that he would be appointed to command Patrols if it was thought desirable, meaning by the Department. There was apparently some misunderstanding about this, and Captain Hatcher was given to understand that he had been sent to command Patrols, and arrived to find that such appointment had been given to Acting Captain Walter Hose, R.C.N., which must have been a disappointment to him, although he at once said he was willing and anxious to do anything.

Commodore Sir C. Coke, on arrival in Canada, looked into the question of anti-submarine defence and demanded some quantities of stores for mine sweeping, depth charges, hydrophones, indicator nets for drifters, and fittings. These requests for stores were forwarded by telegram to the Admiralty, from time to time. Little progress was made as it was found impossible to forward the stores: moreover, strikes occurred in different localities and no ships were ready.

Acting Captain Hatcher, on arrival, went into the matter of anti-submarine defence. His proposed scheme for defence against submarines was drawn up on the assumption that the vessels available would number one hundred drifters and fifty trawlers in addition to

original thirty-six patrol vessels, and necessitated a demand for still more stores. He also requested that paravanes might be ordered, and the matter was taken up with the Admiralty. Evidently Captain Hatcher was not very well up in the use of paravanes for small ships, as will be seen by the attached telegrams.

Not long after his arrival, it was proposed to the Canadian Government to withdraw the first fifty drifters and sixteen trawlers completing.

This last action, taken into consideration with all that had gone before, decided the Minister to ask the Admiralty opinion, through the Colonial Office, on the following lines:-

1. What are considered the probable chances of attack by

submarines on the Canadian Atlantic Coast?

2. On what scale?
3. What defence does Admiralty recommend should be adopted?
4. What does Admiralty propose to do in the event of such an attack developing to such an extent as would point to continuance of enemy attempt to carry on submarine war on this side of the Atlantic?

and to request some definite scheme be given Canada to carry out, after due consideration of the personnel and material available.

In order that the Admiralty officials will have someone at hand who is touch with



DND photo CN-3946



DND photo CN-3949

Above right: HMCS St. Eloi, one of 12 Battle class naval trawlers ordered by the Canadian government, was launched on 2 August 1917 at the Polson Iron Works in Toronto, Ontario. The design of the ships was based on North Sea trawlers and they were lightly armed with a QF 12-pounder gun and depth charges.

Below right: A row of recently launched trawlers, including HMC Ships Festubert, St. Eloi, St. Julien and Vimy, await to be outfitted at the Polson Iron Works.

DND photo CN-3271

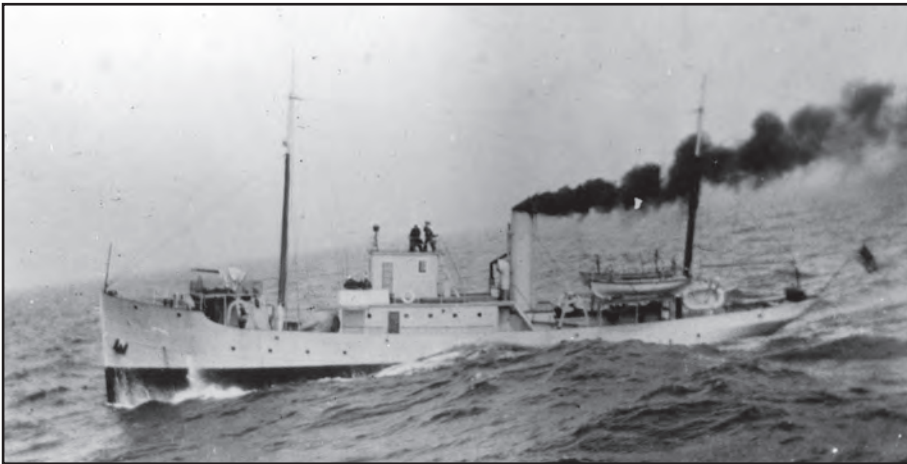


Top: Canadian Drifter 49. One hundred of these 84-foot long wooden anti-submarine vessels were built at Canadian shipyards under contract for the British Admiralty. CD-49 arrived at Sydney, Nova Scotia for operations in July 1918. On her bow is a 6-pounder quick-firing gun; the aerial for a wireless set can be seen between her masts. Depth charges were dropped from the stern.

Middle: HMCS Festubert, one of 12 Battle class naval trawlers. Commissioned in November 1917, she was based at Halifax for much of 1918.

Bottom: TR 8, one of the initial batch of 36 trawlers built in Canada under British Admiralty contract and assigned to the RCN east coast patrol. Commissioned in late June 1918, TR 8 was fitted for minesweeping and stationed at Halifax.

DND photo CN-5078



local conditions, difficulties of purchases, etc., etc., Captain Martin, Superintendent of Halifax Dockyard, has been sent to London.

I would call attention to the following:-

The officers in command of this vessels of the Canadian Patrol have had, with two exceptions, no knowledge of Naval matters prior to the outbreak of hostilities, while there is no exception in the case of the other officers.

With regard to the ratings, the majority of petty officers are ex R.N., while the remainder are in most cases volunteers from all ranks of life – from sea life very few.

With this material, unless it is possible to lend more persons competent to instruct them in the methods in vogue as to the use of nets, depth charges, paravanes, etc., not very much can be expected.

It is also requested that the Department may be kept informed as to the developments in the use of hydrophones. It is regretted that we have no spare officers to send to England to obtain this information.

C E Kingsmill

Admiral,
Director of the Naval Service

DND photo CN-3398

