
H.M.C.S. *Esquimalt*

J272

LOST TO ENEMY ACTION 16 April 1945

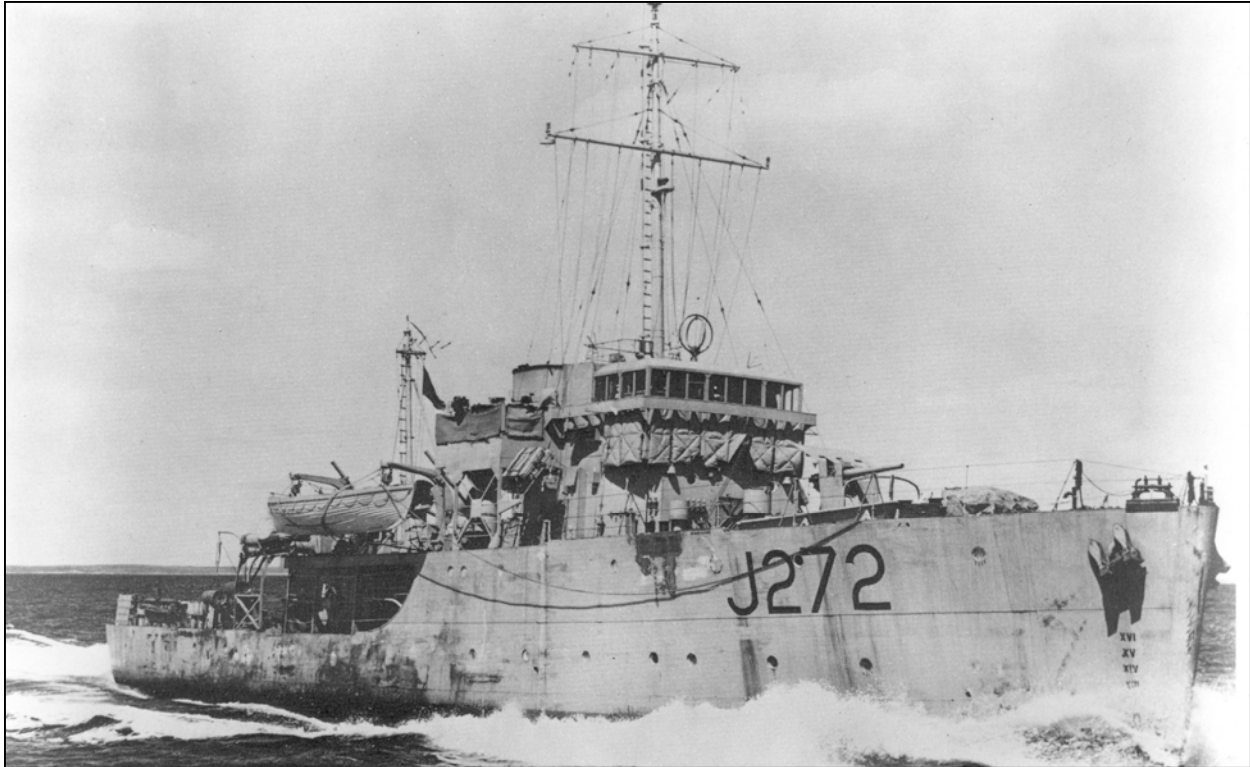


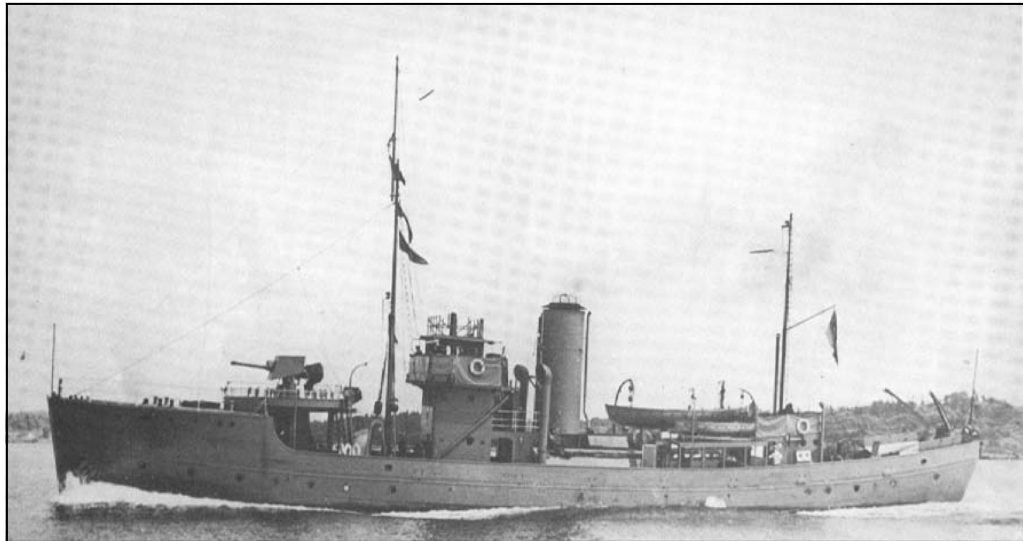
IMAGE COURTESY CFB ESQUIMALT MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

The loss of H.M.C.S. *Esquimalt* was referred to and on the motion of Councillor Ellis, seconded by Councillor Guillemaud it was moved that “this Council’s sympathy with the relatives of members of the crew of H.M.C.S. *Esquimalt* lost in action be recorded.

Minutes of a Special Meeting held April 30th, 1945. [34th Council of the Township of Esquimalt, p. 90]

By the latter part of the 1930s, it was increasingly apparent that a war was not far off, and was felt at that time that it would be necessary to build up the R.C.N.’s counter mine forces. As was the case during WW I, convoys would likely be heading to Britain from Canadian ports, and the approaches could well be mined by the enemy. This threat was taken seriously, and in 1938, the Royal Canadian Navy ordered four minesweepers of the British *Bassett* Class from Canadian yards. One of these ships was built by Yarrows in Esquimalt. The *Nootka* (later re-named *Nanoose*) was commissioned in the same year it was ordered. Identified as the *Fundy Class*, all four vessels were in service quickly, one of the advantages of building an existing design.

It was a step in the right direction, but it was felt that there were too few ships where needed to do the job. Proof of this came when war broke out, and the two ships built in BC and based on the west coast, were ordered to Halifax in March 1940. The *Fundy class* provided good service, but it was felt that additional



Yarrows- built minesweeper HMCS *NOOTKA* [later *Nanoose*] J-35 . *Fundy class* 3/35
crew 460 tons 163.0 x 27.5 x 15.4

Laid Down: 1 Feb.38 launched 26 Sept.38 Com. 6 Dec.38

`sweepers were needed. A stop gap was necessary. With the assistance of the British Ministry of War Transport, four available Norwegian whale catchers were acquired for conversion to auxiliary anti magnetic mine sweepers. The *Suderoys*, following their conversion, served from 1940-45.

In the meantime, the War Supply Board and the Naval Service decided to build another British minesweeper design which could easily be built in Canada in relatively small shipyards, with largely unskilled labour. The same parameters were behind the selection of the British *Flower Class* corvette for Canada. These ships were to be built on both coasts and on the Great Lakes. Approval came on 7 February 1940 and it was decided that an initial order of 28 *Bangors* would be built in Canada. Several were built for the Royal Navy.

There were machinery —engine— differences in the *Bangors*; the first eighteen built were steam, and the remaining 10, including *Esquimalt*, Diesel powered.

The difference in the engine type determined the length of the vessel: steam engines were much bulkier and heavier than Diesels, needed boilers, and so there were two versions of the same ship within the same class. Diesel *Bangors* were shorter by 20 feet. The construction time for the latter was greater due to problems acquiring the engines—2 for each ship.

Displacement: 590 tons

Speed: 15.5 knots

Dimensions: length 162' [Esquimalt] x 28' x 8.3' (Diesel) ;

Main Armament: 1- 12-pdr(originally 4")

Close-in weapons : Aft. mount 2 pdr (40 mm) Bridge wings 20 mm, Oerlikon, or twin .5 inch MG

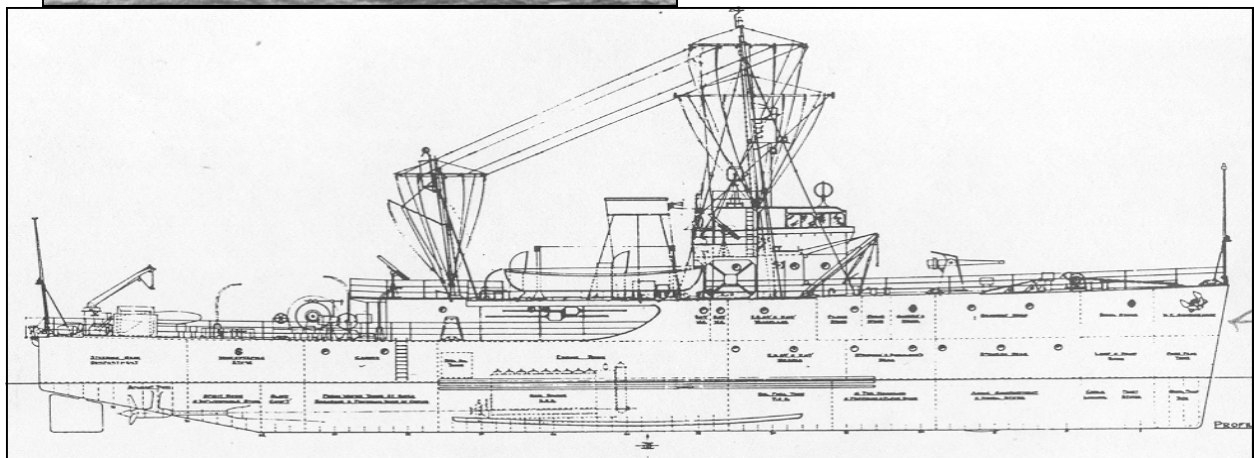


HMCS *Esquimalt* St. Margaret's Bay, NS May 1944 Canada. DND/Library and Archives PA-116954



Left : HMCS *Courtenay*, a *Bangor* attached to Esquimalt Local Defence Force.

Ernie Beadle Collection, Esquimalt Municipal Archives



National Archives of Canada

The R.C.N., when it compiled a list of ship names, chose Canadian towns and cities for frigates, corvettes, and minesweepers. This was a good choice due to the number of names available. The Canadians had learned from the Royal Navy experience when some mistakes were made. When it was looking for a list of possible names for its corvettes, flowers seemed ideal—there were a lot of names available. Apparently this policy did not work out that well in some cases, and there were some that proved unfortunate—that of the “Pansy” being one.

The intention of the Canadian policy was to create a bond between the ship and its crew, and the residents of the town honoured. It was successful. Esquimalt was honoured by having a new *Bangor* Class minesweeper carrying its name. The Esquimalt Council Minutes of 7 December 1942 include a reference to a letter from the Rev. J.H. Graven, Chaplain - in - Charge HMC Dockyard “suggesting that the Municipality adopt the ship bearing its name and make some gift such as a radio or other comforts for the crew...”. A gift of two photographs of Esquimalt Harbour and a donation for comforts for the Ship’s Company were accordingly sent to the ship’s Commanding Officer. In July 1943, he suggested that an ensign from the ship might be appropriate, and this was accepted by Council. There is evidence that the flag may have been turned over to St. Paul’s church. There is an unidentified ensign preserved.

The *Esquimalt* was built in Sorel, Quebec by Marine Industries Ltd., and launched on 8 August 1941. It was commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy on 26 October 1942. The ship experienced serious mechanical problems which delayed its entry into operational service. Then she was assigned to Newfoundland Force and subsequently transferred, in September 1944, to Halifax Local Defence Force. She never served on the west coast.

The *Bangors* value as minesweepers was compromised by their short range, and having been designed to operate in shallower coastal waters. When it was apparent that mines were not going to be a problem in Canada, minesweeping gear was removed except for on the sweepers that served overseas. It was these *ships* that cleared mines from the approaches to beaches in advance of the D- Day landings.

The ships remaining in Canada became anti—submarine escorts, a necessary role in view of U boat activity: the U-806 had sunk the HMCS *Clayoquot* early in 1945 not far from Halifax Harbour. Orders to U boat captains stipulated that they were to sink every allied ship possible despite the obvious fact that Germany was nearing defeat by 1945.

It was hoped by the Kriegsmarine, that newer snorkel-equipped Type XC/40 `boats' with much deadlier GE7es or T-5 *Zaunkönig* acoustic torpedoes would be more successful. These torpedoes—the U-190 carried eight—could home in on a target's propeller noise. This afforded the submarine captain a significant advantage in that he did not have to manoeuvre the `boot' into firing position since the torpedo would head straight for the sound.

There was a defence against attack even by these formidable weapons. Canadian ASW escorts carried a decoy, CAT [Canadian Anti-Acoustic torpedo] gear which, if deployed astern of the ship by a cable, could provide some protection against an acoustic torpedo attack by deflecting it away from the propellers. Instead of following a straight course, RCN ships were also required to zig zag, hopefully throwing off the aim of the U boat. Sonar [ASDIC] also helped locate submarines. Oberleutnant zur See Hans-Rewin Reith, who had taken command of U-190 on 6 July 1944, left his base in Norway in early 1945 for Canadian waters off Halifax harbour.

In the evening of 15 April 1945, H.M.C.S. *Esquimalt*, left for a routine patrol of the approaches to Halifax harbour that would have tragic consequences. Intelligence sources had, earlier reported U Boat activity. Orders to the Captain, Lieutenant Robert MacMillan, RCNVR, were to carry out the patrol and then rendezvous with another *Bangor*, the *Sarnia*. The next morning sea state and visibility were good, and the depth charge crews were instructed to stand down around 06 10 when the watch changed. *Esquimalt* passed over the U-190 with its sonar in operation—it could be heard on the submarine—and when no attack came after a number of passes, Ober Lieutenant Reith had a look with the periscope. The ship was heading straight for the U 190. He fired a homing torpedo from a stern port and hit the *Esquimalt* hard in the stern quarter—it was 0630. The Canadian ship had not de-

ployed its CAT and had not been zig zagging. Fatally damaged, the ship sank in only four minutes at position 44. 28N, 63.10W, 5 miles off Chebucto Head, near Halifax. It was not possible to send a 'May day': everything happened too fast and power was lost immediately.

Not everyone made it off the ship and of the 43 who did, 16 perished. All had suffered terribly from cold and wet exposure. No one ashore knew what had happened. *Sarnia* radioed to shore at 0950 that *Esquimalt* had not kept its rendezvous, and in the course of the search carried out an attack on a possible sonar contact. After six hours during which they came close to being discovered, both from the air and ships seen in the distance, the *Sarnia* rescued them.

Esquimalt was the last Royal Canadian Navy ship lost in action. Victory in Europe was celebrated only three weeks later!



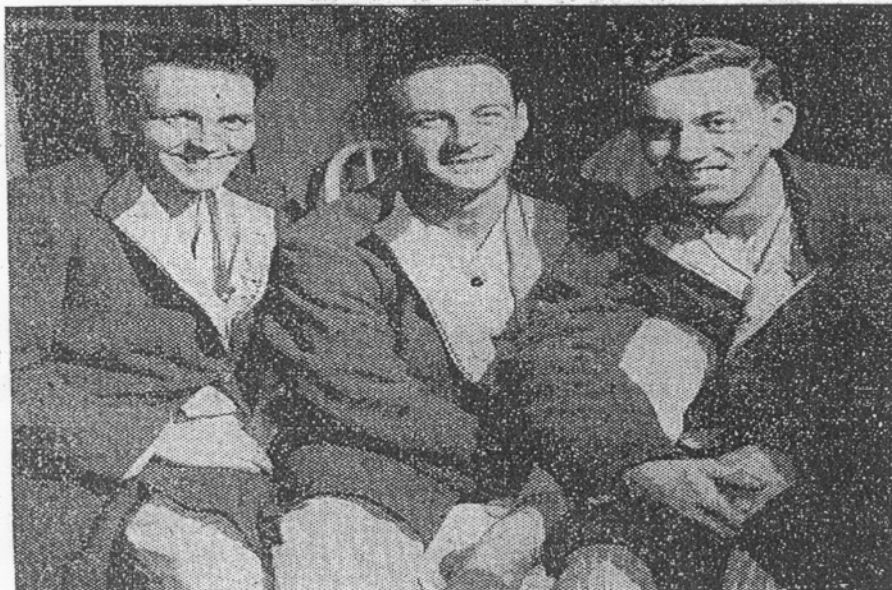
Lt. Richard Graham Arless A-1379 Canada. DND Library and Archives Canada /PA-157029

There was no protection for survivors, Carley floats were not designed to shelter, merely to keep survivors afloat.

**The Municipality of Esquimalt is proud of its connection with Our
Navy**

ONIST, VICTORIA, B.C., FRIDAY, MAY 11, 1945

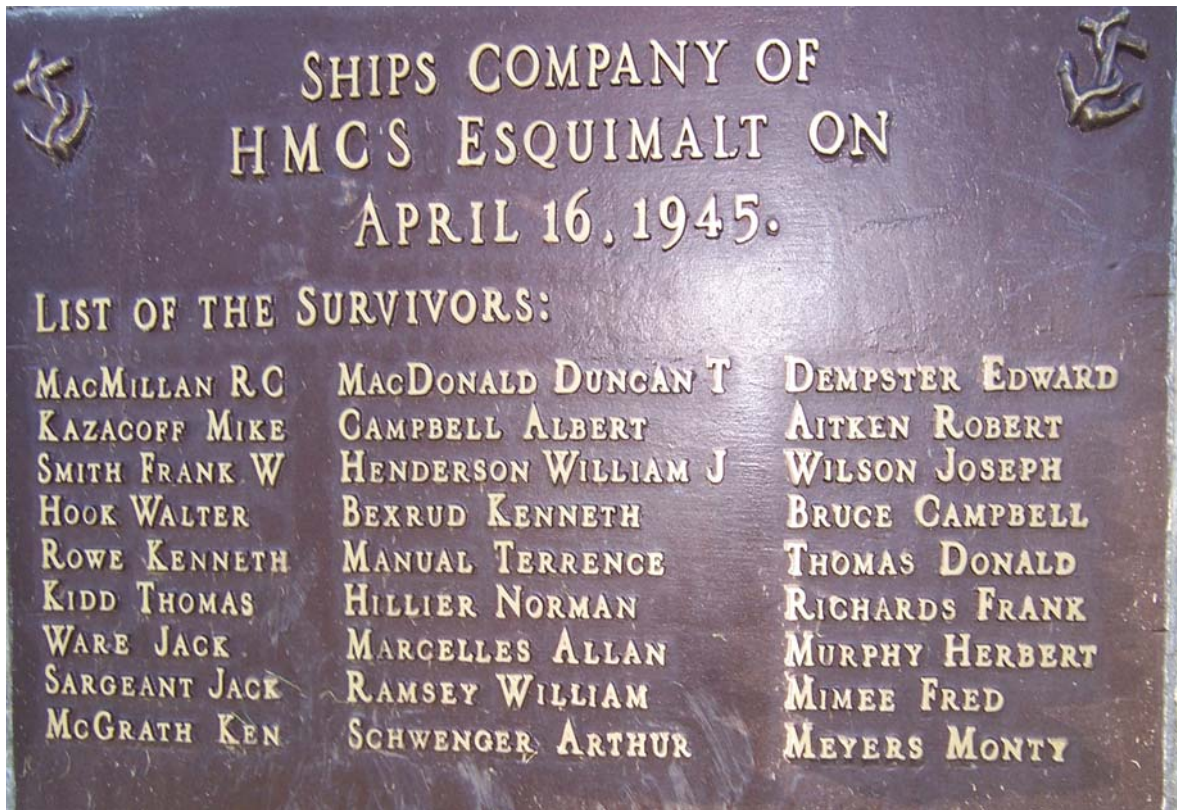
Survivors of H.M.C.S. Esquimalt



SUFFERING from exposure and immersion after six hours in Carley floats after their ship was torpedoed and sunk, survivors of H.M.C.S. Esquimalt were brought to an Eastern Canadian port by a sister ship, H.M.C.S. Sarnia, and taken to hospital for medical attention. Shown above in hospital are three West Coast survivors. They are, left to right: Stoker Kenneth Bexrud, Victoria; Able Seaman Albert B. Campbell, Quesnel, and Able Seaman Edward Dempster, Victoria.



HMCS ESQUIMALT MEMORIAL



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