

Foreword

Forewords rarely begin with a personal note, but my modest wartime experience is illustrative of Canada's ill-preparedness for either the First or Second World Wars. I joined its RCNVR as a seaman in March 1943 and after training served in an ex-American armed motor yacht. Our navy went to war with only six destroyers and four wooden hulled minesweepers. I was commissioned a year later, ended the war in an RCN *Algerine*-class ship, designed as an RN fleet minesweeper, although we used our twelve just as ocean escorts. I stayed in the Reserves until 1978, specializing in anti-submarine warfare. This included the basics of mining and minesweeping, although I was never involved directly, and ended my naval career in NATO control of merchant shipping (NCS) exercises. In the 1970s, from a personal concern about lack of any current mine countermeasures (MCM) capability, I researched and wrote a major paper for a naval association on the subject, urging a return to its attention—even in ships manned mostly by our willing Reserves. When the MCDV's (Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels, designed in part for the MCM job) were finally introduced in the mid-1990's, that is exactly who manned them to a large degree—and most successfully.

Canada, unlike most European countries like the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and so forth, has never had to take mining very seriously. While anticipating enemy sea mining in two world wars, it never seriously occurred. On only two occasions, in 1943, were U-boat moored magnetic mines laid off Halifax and St. John's, Newfoundland, costing four ships sunk. Our own defensive fields were as much a hazard as any enemy's. The Japanese never even tried, as far as we knew. The 'Regular Force Navy,' despite becoming embroiled in both conflicts with a miniscule but quickly expanding surface navy, in both cases concentrated on enlarging that "fighting force" and coping with the Battle of the Atlantic, leaving mine warfare to the speedily recruited volunteers of the RCNR (ex-merchant seamen and fishermen) and the RCNVR, the enthusiastic, largely untrained or experienced amateurs. We were fortunate the enemy—Germany in the first war and the same plus Italy and Japan in the second—never took advantage of a pretty obvious opportunity to aggressively mine Canada's coastal ports and estuaries. Under current conditions of world unrest, that—it is claimed by some of us—will not be the case another time.

Canada's major sea ports all face the open ocean – Halifax, Sydney, St. John, and St. John's in Newfoundland on the Atlantic; Vancouver, Victoria, and now Prince Rupert on the Pacific. Access to the inland Great Lakes ports is via the narrow Cabot Strait leading to the St. Lawrence River highway—easily, and inexpensively, mineable. As the authors of this history point out, all our navies have expended much effort – during war years – countering potential and actual sea mining, from cobbled together make-do ships and crews, to specific shipbuilding, occupying major yard space and funding, to employing large portions of naval forces. Yet, as soon as the war ends and the dangerous job of sweeping up the enemy's and our own mine fields is dealt with, the naval staffs revert to concentrating on major ship warfare. It may change from battleships and cruisers to aircraft carriers and submarines, but mine warfare, the field during those wars for the Naval Reserves, is set aside once again. In Europe they are reminded acutely on occasion of the sea mine dangers even today when a fisherman dredges up a 75-year-old mine, some of which still cost those fishermen's lives.

The story in this book by Commanders Bruhn and Hoole serves not only to remind all of us what was valiantly faced by the Allies in two wars by opponent minelaying, but as a caution to maritime planners as to what is still largely ignored or at least assigned very minor attention now and in the future.

As one of the oldest naval weapons still very much in use – or at least potential use – the personal motto of Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson would seem still appropriate, and maybe serve as a caution:

Palmarum qui meruit ferat – Give the prize to he who deserves it.

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