

# HMCS SACKVILLE

## THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC



HMCS Sackville was one of more than 120 corvettes built in Canada during the Second World War. Corvettes soon became the workhorses of the North Atlantic, escorting merchant convoys to Europe and attacking U-Boats. Without the supplies carried by these merchant ships, the war effort in Europe would have collapsed. The Canadian Navy escorted 25,343 merchant vessels across the Atlantic: ships which carried an incredible total of 181,643,180 tonnes of cargo during the war.

HMCS Sackville was commissioned on December 29, 1941. Serving in well-known escort groups called C1, C2 and C3, Sackville escorted convoys from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Derry, Northern Ireland, from January 1942 to August 1944. Sackville was an original member of the famous Barber Pole Group, with red-and-white barber pole stripes painted on the funnel. All ships in the East Coast Canadian Navy fleet now sport the barber pole symbol. During August 1942, on a westbound convoy mission and 250 nautical miles east of Newfoundland, Sackville encountered a U-boat on the surface. At a range of less than a quarter of a mile, Sackville fired a star shell. The U-boat crash-dived, Sackville accelerated, steamed into the swirl of water and fired a pattern of depth charges. The powerful blast forced the U-boat back up to the surface. She then slipped down into the sea and disappeared. Sackville was credited with a probable kill. Just ninety minutes later, Sackville engaged another surfaced U-boat in a dangerous tactical ballet. Sackville steered courses to ram while the U-boat steered to avoid being attacked, but Sackville's crew succeeded with a good four-inch shell hit, punching a large hole in the base of the submarine's conning tower. The ship was officially credited with the probable damage caused. This damage would have certainly put the U-boat out of commission and it would have had to return to its home port.

In September 1943, Sackville was part of an escort group in the combined westbound convoys called ON. 202 and ONS. 18. (These ill-fated convoys became the victims of the first use of acoustic torpedoes. These advanced torpedoes were a German invention which had sensors to detect engine noise and could home in on the noise a ship made when underway. A lot did not work, but at first there was little Allied defence against them.) In addition to several merchant ships, four of the escort vessels were torpedoed and sunk: the British frigate HMS Lagan; the four-stack (four funnels) destroyer HMCS St. Croix; the British corvette HMS Polyanthus and the British frigate HMS Itchen. Itchen was carrying survivors from the first two ships to go down and when she, too, was torpedoed, there was heavy loss of life. When Itchen blew up, pieces of her superstructure landed on the Canadian corvette HMCS Morden. It was during the enemy action prior to the sinking of HMS Itchen that Sackville, after firing depth charges, experienced a tremendous explosion and it was thought the depth charges had detonated a torpedo close alongside. Sackville's number one boiler was severely damaged. (The boiler was never replaced, which meant she had space on board to be used after the war. In fact, this wartime combat event contributed to Sackville's escape from the scrap yard and is just one reason why we can still visit her today.) Much later, when efforts to make repairs were unsuccessful, it was decided to retire the corvette from active service and use her as a training ship, then later as a Canadian Naval Auxiliary Vessel (CNAV). She served with the Canadian Navy as a CNAV in an oceanographic research role, and it was this decision which has also prolonged the life of this important ship and allowed her to become The Canadian Naval Memorial. She is the very last of all the Flower Class corvettes in existence.

(Ret'd LCdr Pat Jessup, Public Affairs Officer HMCS Sackville)