GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

HMCS MATAPEDIA
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RCN SERIES - VI
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HMCS MATAPEDIA

PREFACE-

In recall of Canadian Naval ships and bases of World War II that bore Gaspesian names, "GASPE OF YESTERDAY" has prepared and published previously the following monographs:

#311	HMCS BONAVENTURE
#312	HMCS GASPÉ I AND HMCS GASPÉ II
#313	HMCS RESTIGOUCHE
#340	HMCS FORT RAMSAY
#349	HMCS MATANE

This article (#369) proposes to recall HMCS MATAPEDIA, bearing as she did the name of one of Gaspesia's historic and widely-known rivers.

CORVETTE

HMCS MATAPEDIA, commissioned into the Canadian Navy on May 9th., 1941, was of the type of anti-submarine ships known by the Class name of Corvette. Back in the days of sail a corvette was a sloop of war with one tier of guns that ranked below a frigate. The name was revived in World War II to denote lightly armed and highly maneuverable vessels designed for anti-submarine escort duty in the desperate Battle of the Atlantic. These new vessels possessed many of the capabilities of destroyers but were smaller and less expensive to build and operate. With an overall length of 205 feet HMCS MATAPEDIA had a displacement of 950 tons. In general, vessels of the corvette class had a reputation for a peculiar, corkscrew motion in the North Atlantic seas - a motion that induced sea-sickness in all but the hardiest sailors. As will become evident HMCS MATAPEDIA was no exception.

OFF TO WAR

After commissioning at Quebec HMCS MATAPEDIA sailed for Halifax, arriving at that busy war-time naval base on May 24th. She was ordered to join the Sydney (N,S.) Force for escort duty where she served until the end of September, 1941.

Transferred to the Newfoundland Naval Command, HMCS MATAPEDIA began ocean escort duty on September 29th., guarding a convey bound via

ICELAND to the British Isles. After three such round trips she left St.John's in February,1942 to escort a convoy bound to Londonderry,Northern Ireland. Upon her return she joined the WLEF (escort force) and with the exception of a stint with Gaspé Force from November to December 1944 she remained with the WLEF until the end of the war.

HMCS MATAPEDIA underwent a major refit at Pictou in the summer of 1942. On September 8th.,1943 she was rammed amidships in a thick fog off Sambro Lightship by the S.S.SCORTON and seriously damaged. After temporary repairs at Dartmouth she was towed to Liverpool, N.S. for full repairs and refit,including fo'c's'le extension. This was completed early in February 1944 and a month later she proceeded to Bermuda for two weeks workup before returning to escort duty. She underwent one further major refit from February to April,1945 at Halifax.again followed by workup in Bermuda,but the war was now over and she was paid off at Sorel,Quebec on June 16.

HMCS MATAPEDIA was broken up at Hamilton in 1950.

SEA-SICK STOKER

HMCS MATAPEDIA witnessed a bit of naval medical history as recounted by Thomas G.Lynch in the following narrative.

"Late in 1941,the war in the North Atlantic was entering its most grim period for the Allies,especially the greatly over-extended Canadian navy. Desperate to expand to fulfil its obligations in the convoys that were Britain's life-line,Canada was producing the stop-gap,under-equipped corvette in ever-increasing numbers, and manning them with green recruits fresh from a training centre at Halifax and reserve divisions across Canada.

Sailors who had never seen the sea or sailed in anything larger than a sailboat were pressed into service,with a sprinking of seasoned hands to train them while on the job. The volunteer sailors would ply back and forth between the new western Atlantic naval base at St.John's and an eastern terminus in gale-scoured Icelandic fjords,with little or no time for rest. Into this picture entered a state of human discomfort that had defied all remedies for centuries: sea-sickness.

No one who has ever been to sea can forget sea-sickness.

SEA-SICK STOKER (ctd)

"This totally incapacitating affliction strikes with little warning and unfortunately recurs with frightening monotony to those prone to the condition. Nowadays, there are effective suppressants that make an ocean voyage tolerable, just. However, in 1941, sea-sickness was still a joke at sea (shared only by those immune), a misery to green hands, and something not recognized as an incapacitating condition by officials of the RCN.

Stoker J.S.Maloney, of Winnipeg, joined the corvette, HMCS MATAPEDIA in the last days of December, 1941. He was desperate to go to sea to fight the U-boats, full of confidence and reasonably well-trained in his trade. However, within 10 minutes of St.John's harbour, he became violently ill.

He wasn't alone in his misery; dozens of first-time officers and men were crippled by the ship's peculiar corkscrew motion. Green of face, and haunting the ship's heads, they suffered for a few days until they gained their sea-legs. However, Maloney soon proved to be a chronic case. The chief engineer reported the new hand was useless at his post in this condition, and had been detailed to remain in his hammock. Captain Ronald J. Herman, a professional sailor by trade and Commander of MATAPEDIA, concurred.

As the journey continued, Maloney became a greater and greater cause of alarm. When Sub-Lieutenant John Rhodes Sturdy of Willowdale, Ontario, was sent below to check on the sailor's condition, he found him gray of face; he almost looked like a cadaver. He had lost considerable weight and was suffering chronic dehydration. Maloney was indifferent to his surroundings, and had given up any interest in life.

Sixteen-and-a-half days later, HMCS MATAPEDIA arrived in Iceland, securing alongside the British depot ship HECLA, which had several Royal Navy medical officers aboard. Stoker Maloney was transferred to HECLA on the assumption that a long stint in sick bay would be

SEA-SICK STOKER (ctd)

"necessary to restore him.Less than an hour later, Sub-Lieutenant sturdy was ordered aboard to hear the medical opinion.

The medical officer said that there wasn't anything wrong with Maloney,other than a bit of undernourishment. Sturdy insisted the stoker was a chronic sufferer of sea-sickness,but the doctor quickly put a stop to this line of argument by stating that the condition was only temporary and besides,neither navy recognized sea-sickness as a bonafide illness. Maloney,clearly unhappy, sailed with MATAPEDIA two days later,and within minutes,was back hanging over the rail.

Off Iceland,the ship ran into an 80-mile-an-hour gale that smashed the bridge,forcing the ship to be forwarded to Halifax from St.John's for repairs. From Captain Herman to the lowest rating,only one thought was foremost:to have Maloney posted ashore before he died. Of this they were sure:he would die from starvation and dehydration on the next trip.Indeed,it would be touch-and-go on this trip: MATAPEDIA made best speed for Halifax with a terribly weakened stoker.

They won their race with death,and,after feeding Maloney in the relatively still waters of Halifax harbour,dispatched him to the base medical offices, trusting that his pitiful condition would lead to a shore posting. Two hours later,he was back.

Yhe officer of the watch demanded to know why he was back,to which Maloney sullenly answered he was ordered to rejoin his ship because there was nothing medically wrong with him. The news was passed to the Captain,who knew that Maloney could not survive another spell of sea duty. A conference was called in the wardroom.A plan of action was mapped out in the realization that the situation was bigger than Maloney. There were hundreds of sailors serving on RCN ships on nothing than dry

SEA-SICK STOKER (ctd)

crackers and lime juice to sustain them, slowly losing a battle with their inner ear and stomach.

Starting at a low level, they moved through various departments to the base executive branch. In some they received a sympathetic hearing, but all declared that their hands were tied. If the medical branch of the Royal Canadian Navy refused to accept chronic sea-sickness as a fact, then the cause was hopeless, since no one could dictate to the doctors - unless, of course, one were an Admiral. Captain Herman, deciding that the only course that remained open should be explored, asked for an appointment with the Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast (Halifax) Rear-Admiral George C. (Jetty) Jones. Admiral Jones listened sympathetically to Herman's presentation and then to an argument offered by Sub-Lieutenant Sturdy that it was unfortunate that Canada's navy of small ships did not rate medical officers, and that it was forced to rely on the occasional Royal Navy or Royal Canadian Navy medical officer on the larger destroyers.

Jones, a seasoned seafarer himself, was aware of the large number of surplus medical officers in his Command, added to by a large draft that had arrived less than seven days before. Calling his Chief of Staff he asked for a weather forecast for the following day. He was told that strong easterly winds and choppy seas were expected. A small smile stealing across his face, Admiral Jones ordered up a ship for the following morning; all medical officers not on call, he said, were to report aboard for sea time during day-long manoeuvres off Halifax harbour.

The ship to which 40 medical officers reported the following day was a tiny, 180 foot Bangor mine-sweeper which was, if anything, worse than a corvette for violent movement at sea. She cleared harbour at 6 a.m., the upper decks crowded with officers wearing the red and gold rings of the medical branch. She returned that evening.

SEA-SICK STOKER (ctd)

Next morning,Sub-Lieutenant Sturdy was sent to make inquiries of the first officer of the minesweeper,who said that the trip had been a "ruddy shambles".They had had to organize parties among the medical officers to prevent one going over the leeward side,the press against the handlines being that great.He said these parties were drilled thus:

"First seasick party,Advance three steps to the rail. All together now ! First seasick party,about face. Second seasick party, fall in !

After recovering from the mirth that had struck both RCNVR officers,Sturdy returned to H?CS MATAPEDIA post-haste, and, before the medical offices opened, deposited Maloney on the steps with the ship's file on his case in hand. He was first in line when some medical officers,still a little green about the gills,reported for duty.

Within half an hour a smiling Stoker Maloney arrived over the ship's brow to collect his kit.Across his file containing his papers was stamped in red ink:"Unfit for sea duty", and, in a shaky hand, "Chronic sea-sickness". Aboard MATAPEDIA there was celebration that night. They had put sea-sickness on the medical map.

The story doesn't end there.An eminent team was formed in early 1943 to deal with the question of sea-sickness. The team,including Dr.C.H.Best,co-discoverer of insulin; Dr.Wilder Penfield, Head of the Montreal Neurological Institute; Dr.R.L.Noble and RCN medical officers E.A. Sellers, William S.Fields,John M.Parker and Bruce Campbell, began research in all aspects of motion sickness and in 1943 was successful in combining hyoscine EBr, hyoscyamine HBr and ethyl B-methyl allythiobarbituric acid to produce something officially known as the "Royal Canadian Navy Sea-sickness Remedy"

Aware only of their small victory over medical indifference in the case of Stoker Maloney,and getting recognition of sea-sickness, the officers and men of MATAPEDIA and that forgotten Bangor minesweeper were the spark that

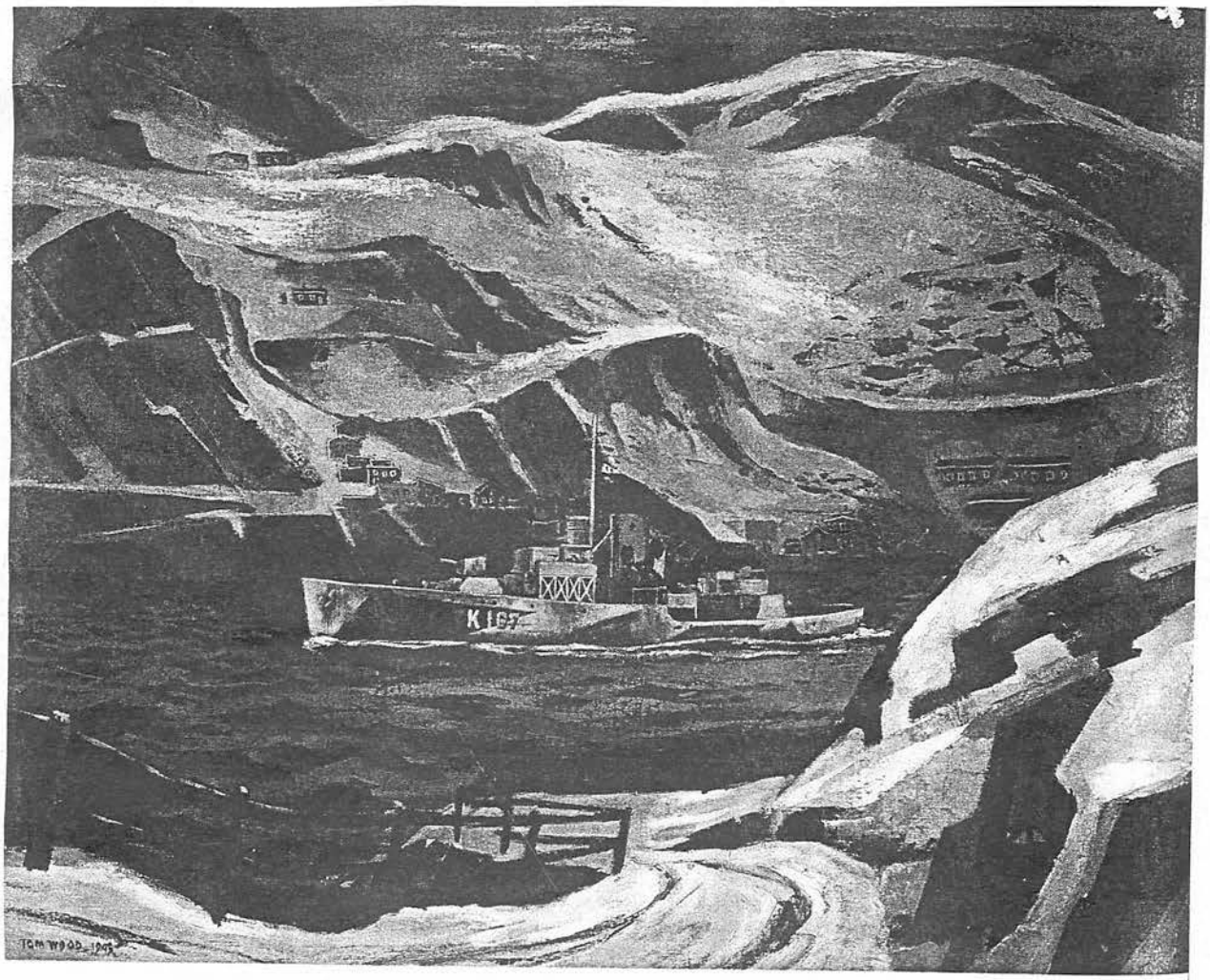
SEA-SICK STOKER (ctd)

that caused the formation of the research team. Their concern about a shipmate helped to produce a medicine that allowed sea-sickness sufferers to tolerate sea duty later in the war.

Writing afterwards, Sub-Lieutenant sturdy summed up their feelings:

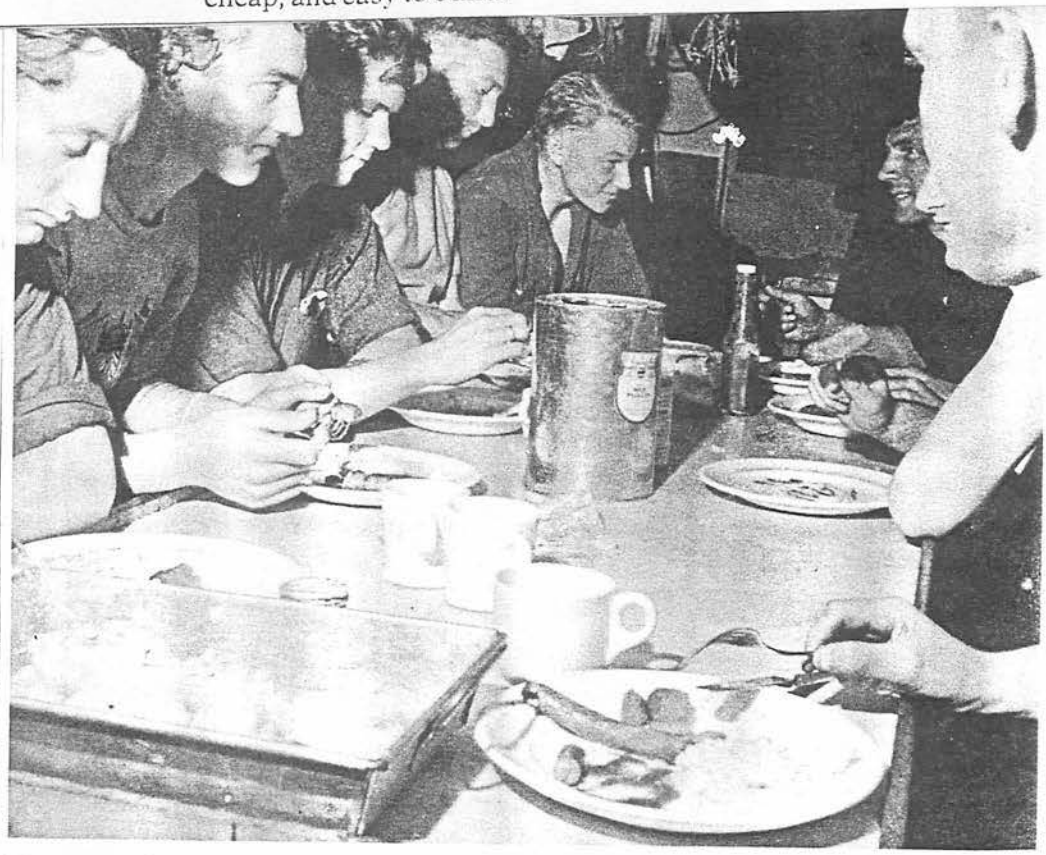
"Let the honors fall where they may. We of HMCS MATAPEDIA will be content with this small postscript in history."

Matapedia, 1941



Corvette Entering St. John's, Newfoundland, Tom Wood. The RCN's little corvettes, just over 200 feet long, bore the brunt of the U-boat war, and St. John's, with its superb harbour, was their refuge. (CWM10554)

Most of the protection for convoys was provided by corvettes like HMCS *Halifax*, built in Montreal in 1941. The design was based on that of a whaling ship; whales, like U-boats, were fast and elusive under water, and whalers were seaworthy, cheap, and easy to build.



Living conditions at sea could be horribly cramped. On corvettes like *Kamsack* (above), hammocks were slung everywhere, and those who could not find slinging space slept on seat cushions or on the deck. Since washwater had to be distilled from the sea, little washing was allowed. One sailor remembered trying to sleep "while below me someone put sardines on toast, and the smells from the paint-locker and the heads fought the other smells, and the motion went on, and everything creaked and groaned and rattled."