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Directorate of History
National Defence Headquarters
Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0K2

July 1986

REPORT NO. 10

DIRECTORATE OF HISTORY

CFHQ

30 June 1966

HMCS PRESERVER (Fairmile Depot Ship 1942-1945)

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Introduction: the ship and the situation

1. During the Second World War the Royal Canadian Navy's most important responsibility was the protection of sea-borne trade, particularly from submarine attack. Most of this work was done by H.M.C. frigates and corvettes. From their bases at Halifax, St. John's and Londonderry, Northern Ireland, they gave protection to merchantmen across the ocean. In more sheltered waters near the coast smaller warships were cheaper to provide, and it was in coastal or off-shore waters that shipping lanes, constricted by destination or geography into focal points of trade, gave especially tempting concentrations of targets to the enemy. In home waters on the East Coast and off Newfoundland, the RCN from 1942 operated a fleet of Fairmile Motor Launches which were specially designed for anti-submarine operations. They had less endurance than the ocean-going escorts and were poorer sea-keepers, but these facts did not prevent their efficient operation if they were working close to a base and to sheltered harbours. However, while the East Coast had plenty of the latter, in many long stretches there were neither developed ports nor naval bases. Hence there arose the requirement

for Depot Ships -- mobile bases that would permit the Motor Launches to pursue their sub-hunting off remote and undeveloped shores, uninterrupted except by the most serious of defects or damage.

2. There were two Fairmile Depot Ships, H.M.C. Ships PRESERVER and PROVIDER. This report is the history of the first of these vessels. The principal sources used were Navy Central Registry files on PRESERVER and the 29 Fairmile Motor Launches (MLs) that at one time or another operated under her command. PRESERVER's Reports of Proceedings are the most important. They are almost complete, lacking only the periods 4 August to 7 September 1942; February - March and 1 to 26 July 1943; and March and July 1945. These gaps are adequately covered by the ship's Logs. Unless otherwise indicated, information and quotations in the report are taken from these documents. For all of the MLs concerned, Navy Central Registry has files on "Movements", "General Information" and "Days at Sea". However, haphazard collections of Reports of Proceedings were found for only nine of the 29.

3. HMCS PRESERVER¹ was laid down 10 July 1941 and launched 12 December. Her cost when finished was \$1,024,361., of which \$923,000 was for the hull and engines.² Her displacement of 4670 tons made her the largest ship the R.C.N. had yet built in its 32 years of existence. Other specifications were:

length	268 feet, 11 inches
beam	43 feet, 11 inches
deepest draft (aft, with full load)	17 feet, 11 inches
machinery	twin screw five cylinder Fairbanks-Morse Diesel engines
speed (designed)	10 knots
armament	one 4-inch gun two 20-mm. Oerlikons two Lewis guns two Bren guns. ³

Essentially, this vessel was a tanker; her capacity for the various fuels which the MLs based on her would need was

gasoline	507,600 gallons
diesel oil	180,000 gallons
fresh water	94,500 gallons. ⁴

Projecting forward she had a crane capable of lifting one of the 100-ton MLs clear of the water. Another special feature was her workshops and repair gear.

Almost half the ship's complement consisted of specialists in A/S detection apparatus, ordnance, radar and W/T, as well as carpenters, blacksmiths, plumbers and a diver for underwater work.⁵

This specialized company of artificers and mates was not for PRESERVER herself, but for her brood of little ones. Total approved complement was 16 officers and 84⁶ men. It increased slightly as the war went on, to 18⁷ officers and 101 men in March 1945. This was five or six hands more than the accommodation the ship was built to provide; the medical officer reported in October 1944 that the ratings who slung their hammocks in the machine shop seemed quite contented and domestic among their saws, lathes and drills.

4. When Commander B.L. Johnson, R.C.N.R.,⁸ commissioned PRESERVER at 0800 11 July 1942, a much-dreaded situation was just developing. Canadian naval officials had long been apprehensive of the day when German U-boats would begin to prey on Canada's coastwise traffic. Of the river and Gulf of Saint Lawrence, the naval historian has written,

...There could hardly have been a more fruitful return for so small an expenditure in any other area open to the submarine . . . the St. Lawrence was a highway thronged with a heavy and essential coastal trade, . . . more than half the country's harbour facilities concerned with the Atlantic export trade lay within the river; there was a vital timber trade that could only be moved by sea, frequently from exposed ports; . . . and in the event of a Canadian defeat in the St. Lawrence, the diversion of exports to other ports would have disrupted and retarded the general movement of trade.⁹

Moreover, along the exposed shores of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland were ports, many of them completely undefended, whose open situation and easy approach especially invited attack. And in all these coastal waters there often occurred hydrographic conditions that made submarine detection extremely difficult. Throughout 1940 and 1941, the U-boats gradually extended their depredations farther and farther west in the Atlantic. Then on 12 May 1942, they arrived on the threshold of Gaspé, and two ships were sunk west of Anticosti Island.

5. Now important areas hitherto unmolested must be patrolled, U-boat hiding places discovered, and port defences hurriedly completed. Without weakening the forces devoted to Atlantic escort, ships were scraped

together to provide some protection for newly-instituted convoy schedules: Quebec to Sydney (QS, SQ); Sydney to Port aux Basques (SPAB); Quebec to Goose Bay, Labrador (LN, NL). In these emergency measures the Fairmile Motor Launches -- which had started coming into service at the beginning of 1942 -- were indispensable. PRESERVER's job, as she undertook her first voyage downriver from Marine Industries, Limited (Sorel) in July, was to be the necessary but prosaic background for their more exciting and active operations. Her role against the enemy would be the indirect one of supporting and extending the Fairmiles' activities by means of her gasoline, six months store of provisions, and administrative and repair facilities.

First of her class

6. Soon after leaving Quebec on 19 July to join QS 20 at Bic,¹⁰ PRESERVER suffered a seized port stern bearing. This necessitated a major repair job for which she limped back to the G.T. Davie yard at Lauzon. She was hauled out there from the 22nd to 27th, then sailed with the next Sydney convoy. At 1035 4 August she secured at No. 3 jetty, Halifax.

7. Despite the urgency of the struggle for mastery over U-boats which were even then hunting in Canadian waters, another six weeks elapsed before PRESERVER took her active war station. The R.C.N. had accepted her from Marine Industries as a mere hull with engines;¹¹ she still had to be outfitted with naval stores and her ordnance, wireless/telegraphy and anti-submarine gear. Moreover, the major breakdown

* She was not equipped with asdic, but had Admiralty Echo Sounder MS 12 which could be used for submarine detection in certain circumstances. (Naval Surplus Disposal Committee to Minister of Reconstruction 24 January 1946--8000-38/vol.1)

she experienced in her first few hours of steaming, plus a few lesser defects that soon revealed themselves, showed she was not a perfect example of the ship-maker's art. But the most serious flaws resulted from poor work on the part of the naval constructors who gave the plans to the builder.

Present fresh water capacity of ship would appear sufficient for only 14 days for ship and 6 FM's even with controlled use . . . /PRESERVER can only do/ routine maintenance repairs and overhauls owing to the small space available for work benches and machinery, etc. . . No provision has been made in PRESERVER for carrying culinary coal for FM's. 12

These matters were certainly annoying and time-consuming. In the case of galley coal for the Fairmiles, for instance, the final decision was to store the necessary fuel in bags wherever they could be stuffed into PRESERVER for the time being -- and then proceed to switch over all of the dozens of ML galleys from coal-burning to diesel oil. 13

8. What worried Commander Johnson most was his ship's seaworthiness. Making passage from Halifax to Pictou on 7-8 September, in a breeze of only 30 knots,

PRESERVER shipped heavy water /with/ damage to deck fittings and flooding in the Midship Stores and the lower After Messes. 14

The trouble was the very low height amidships and the square-fronted poop (afterhouse) that caught and trapped the seas. The Inspector of Contract-Built Ships had indeed warned that this type of damage might occur, but that was in his preliminary inspection of the finished ship, when it was too late to change the basic structure.

While at Pictou for a week, PRESERVER's own company did something about it. The dockyard workers caught up with some of the alterations and additions that had been approved, and PRESERVER's Commanding Officer had his own men build a breakwater on the upper deck forward of the afterhouse. He explained to Captain (Destroyers) Newfoundland how this type of ship should be shaped: "In modern tankers the poop front is elliptical and the seas coming from ahead glance¹⁵ overboard." This work improved the ship somewhat, but when she sailed for Sydney and St. John's at mid-September, two of the 13 items still outstanding in her list of alterations were stiffening of the poop front, and rendering watertight the doors in that part of the vessel.

9. Many of these shortcomings were probably inevitable. PRESERVER was the first of her class to be built by the R.C.N. N.S.H.Q. willingly viewed her as an experiment, to indicate what the exact requirements for a Depot Ship really were. In the early part of her first commission, PRESERVER was signalled to provide to Ottawa

. . . further remarks on performance of ships and armament, fuel consumption at various speeds and any other remarks considered helpful towards improvement in design for present two and a possible third base supply ship.¹⁶

10. A full month before PRESERVER was ready to leave her Nova Scotia refitting yards, Flag Officer Newfoundland (F.O.N.F.) had settled upon her employment. He replied to query from Headquarters that the

permanent arrangement would likely see her
stationed at Red Bay, [★] Labrador, with a flotilla
of MLs. This would be, though,

. . . at a later date when sufficient
Fairmiles are available to justify the
institution of a Belle Isle patrol in
addition to Vabana patrol of which I
consider the latter one more important.¹⁷

In the meantime, PRESERVER would become part of the
Newfoundland Force's IIL organization at St. John's,
sailing from there to the outports as need arose.
Navigating a dense fog from Sydney by means of
soundings and Dead Reckoning, PRESERVER arrived at
St. John's on 1st September to begin this programme.

11. Two days later 6 MLs of the 71st and 73rd
Flotillas came alongside and reported under her orders.
A description of these vessels is in order here, as they
provided the raison d'être of PRESERVER's career in
the remaining two and a half years of the war. The
Fairmile Motor Launch was 112 feet long by 18 feet
beam, of 100 tons displacement, manned by a company
of 2 officers and 14 men. Her work was anti-submarine
patrol and escort, so that the chief arms were an
180-degree ahead-searching asdic (Type 134 A) ¹⁸ of one mile

★ The message reads "Orn Bay" which cannot be located,
so it may have been a local name for Red Bay --
where PRESERVER was permanently stationed -- or else
an error in the transmission or deciphering.

range and 300-pound depth-charges which could be rolled¹⁹ off the stern or hurled from the "Y" gun mounted aft. The other weapons were one 3-pounder and twin Colt 0.5-inch machine guns (later changed to three 22 mm. Oerlikons).²⁰ All the MLs had radio. Radio Direction Finding gear (radar), that indispensable device for locating U-boats in their favourite attack position -- on the surface, at night -- was only gradually supplied to them because they took second precedence to the sea-going escorts. In September 1942 just one-quarter of PRESERVES's MLs were so equipped; by May 1944 one²¹ Fairmile in four was without it.

12. The double-mahogany craft were relatively high-powered by two gasoline engines of 635 or 850 horsepower each, giving a top speed of 24 knots. The gas mileage of the first MLs at cruising speed, worked out to²² 2.4 gallons per mile. These ships cost an average of \$140,330.²³ The RCN had 45 in commission by the end of 1942; in 1944 63; and at the end of the war 80.²⁴ Their basic organization was in flotillas of six, under the administrative and operational control of some base authority. Throughout, PRESERVES was usually in complete charge of the MLs attached to her, not only supplying their logistic needs, but directing their patrols and operations as well. Though auxiliary to these little front-line craft, PRESERVES was senior. Commanding Officer PRESERVES submitted to higher authority a monthly report stating the efficiency of his attached MLs, under ten headings: armament, engines, hull, batteries, steering, asdic, wireless, radar, personnel and miscellaneous (pumps, plumbing, loud hailer, etc.) The

list makes clear that it was PRESERVER's engineer officer who had most to do with the MLs; towards the end of the war, it became customary for another of the mother ship's officers to be designated for ML Liaison as well. The small craft were always on the go -- in one month, 40% of their time on patrol; in another 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ days at sea out of 31.²⁵ Their dash and hurry were in marked contrast to the Depot Ship's habits, whose greatest cruising effort of the whole war was in September 1942, when on 11 days PRESERVER did not spend the entire 24 hours tied up.²⁶ This is not to disparage PRESERVER. She was a special kind of ship, fighting her part of the anti-submarine war.

Wabana patrol: September 1942

13. The first place PRESERVER took her MLs was to Harbour Grace, in Conception Bay just north of St. John's. Three-quarters of a million tons of iron ore a year²⁷ were mined on Bell Island in Conception Bay and shipped to Sydney, where the blast furnaces were an important part of the East Coast's economy and of the war effort. The situation which had prevailed at Wabana could go on no longer. Since the beginning of the war as many as four or five ore-carriers were often waiting in the open roadstead, or loading alongside, devoid of any protection against submarines. On 5 September 1942, a German U-boat finally intruded and sunk the merchantmen LORD STRATHCONA and SAGALAGA.

14. The account of U-513's attack at Wabana became available the following year, when the U-boat herself was sunk and the crew interrogated. Their story showed that they found nothing easier than shooting ships in Conception Bay, and yet that a little defensive precaution might have been quite effective. After a fruitless week off the Strait of Belle Isle, U-513 (Korvettenkapitän Ruggeberg)²⁸ followed a freighter in to the Wabana anchorage. There were no nets, mines, loops or patrols to worry about, but the German commander could not know that; besides, he needed a pilot. Overnight 4/5 September, U-513 rested on the bottom in 13 fathoms. With daylight she rose to periscope depth and fired a brace of torpedoes. These sank, because the submarine's crew had put on the wrong settings.

Before the next attack could be launched, U-513 broke surface briefly, but none of the look-outs on the anchored steamers saw her. After this incident the boat again manoeuvred into firing position and shot two torpedoes at the freighter she had selected as her first victim. . . . Immediately after the explosion all other ships made frantic efforts to either shift their position or to get out of the harbour. Due to the shallow water U-513 could not move with her accustomed ease, and when another of the steamers, estimated at 7000 tons, swung around suddenly on her way out, U-513 was dealt a glancing blow on the conning tower, forcing her into the mud of the shallow harbour. This action, however, was no intentional ramming, and it is doubted whether the steamer was aware that she had scraped against the hull of a U-boat. Recovering swiftly from the blow, U-513 fired two torpedoes from her stern tubes, sinking the steamer.²⁹

The submarine then proceeded without interruption to sea to check her own damage.

15. Flag Officer Newfoundland at once took steps to make the enemy's task harder than U-513's had been. Convoys to Sydney (WB, BW) were instituted, and two MLs were dispatched to Conception Bay, their patrol being relieved from St. John's every few days. PRESERVER was ordered there with her two flotillas on 22 September to bring added protection for the iron-ore trade and take charge of the gathering defences.

16. The arrangements she made during a brief nine-day stay in Conception Bay were threefold:

1) one ML was detailed guardship at the entrance of Harbour Grace, helping protect the Base Ship in her anchorage; 2) in pairs, the MLs carried out anti-submarine patrol in the vicinity of Bell Island.

When no merchant ships are at Wabana a single patrol is kept in mid-channel to guard the loading wharves and the power house which are vulnerable to torpedo attack. It is considered practical and advisable to screen these valuable targets with permanent Anti/Torpedo nets and these nets would also screen merchant ships whilst at the loading berth.

3) boats not on one of these duties were available for odd jobs of investigation and escort, and while alongside PRESERVER were kept ready to proceed as a striking force should a U-boat report come in.

17. There were three alarms in the period. On two occasions faint underwater echoes were attacked with no results. In the deep quiet of the middle watch, a message was received from Military Officer Commanding Bay Roberts (seven miles south of Harbour Grace).

A submarine had been sighted there, dark on the waves under 6/10 cloud cover. MLs 058 and 061 were racing to the scene, and ML 077 was being prepared to join the hunt. A quarter of an hour later the two leaders rounded Mad Point into Bay Roberts. They searched. Then

. . . 061 observed a dark object on the port beam. Knowing that Q.058 was away to starboard she closed to investigate and repeatedly challenged but received no answer, when into about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cables [300 yards] they saw a small blue light flashing which they eventually read as FQ. Course was altered away at once. . . . It is considered that Q.061 and Q.058 should have been informed that Q.077 was joining.

18. ML 077, third on the scene, had picked up an echo as was on an attack run when 061 had come at her on a collision course. The depth-charges were rolled anyway, a little late; they heaved up the waters of the bay, but no U-boat or wreckage materialized. The contract was eventually classified as non-submarine. Concerning ML 077's attack, Captain (D) Newfoundland later observed:

In view of the number of attacks being carried out by Fairmiles each week in approximately the same position it is recommended that PRESERVER prepare a non-sub chart for the information of FM's patrolling in this area.

19. This episode illustrates many of the frustrations that PRESERVER and her MLs would continue to experience. An attack would be delivered, with precision and skill, but without result. On these faulted and shallow shores it was to be expected that most of the ML attacks would be on underwater pinnacles of rock, wrecks or fish. And the consistent lack of a

real foe to engage must have in time taken the urgency from their practices, the edge off their tactics.

20. To a large extent, then, this report deals with the inevitable wastage of material and effort involved in defensive naval precautions. On the other hand, it is a matter for gratification that in all the ports and channels PRESERVER protected during 1942-1945, the enemy seemed never once to come near. From this point of view, the U-boats were warned away from ECNE's preserve because the precautions he took were known or guessed at. It might be as true to consider, however, that the spreading U-boat war was well designed to scatter Allied naval strength, and that the history of PRESERVER gives some details of this dispersion.

21. PRESERVER discontinued her watch at Wabana on 1 October and returned to St. John's. On 2 November an enemy U-boat again visited there and two more freighters were sunk. ^{*} Soon after, the permanent nets which Commander Johnson had suggested -- D.O.D. had minuted, "This is a good idea. Am asking PRESERVER for a bit more amplification" -- were installed. ³⁰ There was an end to submarine successes in Conception Bay. Botwood and Lewisporte: October - December 1942

22. PRESERVER was next sent to Botwood on Newfoundland's north shore and arrived there with four MLs of the 71st Flotilla on 7 October. As Naval Officer

* ROSECASTLE (7800 tons) and PLM 27 (5633 tons), sunk by U-518, Oblt. z. S. Wissmann. 31

in Command Botwood,³² Commander Johnson had two separate areas to protect. Besides Botwood, where PRESERVER was moored, there was Lewisporte -- about ten miles east through the woods and over twice that distance by sea. From both ports wood products, especially paper, were the chief exports.

23. On 8 October, while PRESERVER's Commanding Officer called on "Senior Military Officer Botwood Defences", Lieutenant J.S. Davis, R.C.N.V.R. (Senior Flotilla Officer, commanding ML 060) was sent to Lewisporte to make recommendations for its protection. The main patrol at Botwood was inaugurated the same day: one ML for 24 hours daily, well to seaward between Wiseman Head and High Greco Island. From 13 October on, it was reinforced at dawn (0400 to 20 minutes after sunrise) by an additional inner patrol between Phillips Head and Lower Sandy Point. "The patrols in the narrow approaches to this harbour," it was reported to F.O.N.F. "are encountering difficulties with shore echoes. The A/S officer is endeavouring to find a remedy."

so moored . . . that she can sweep the harbour entrance with her bow oscillator.... Under normal conditions this patrol will remain moored in Job's Cove, keeping best possible lookout and hydrophone listening watch. This is the opportunity to make all necessary repairs to auxiliaries. Commanding Officers will use their judgment as to slipping and keeping cruising patrol.³³

25. There were six enemy alarms during PRESERVER's nine weeks at Botwood. Some were the type now becoming almost routine: an asdic echo classified "possible submarine" for safety's sake, and depth-charged without result. The 22 October alert was more colorful, when the ML on patrol reported white rockets and gunfire. "It was later discovered to be an unheralded Army Manoeuvre." Just two days later:

2330 -- Received signal from Army reporting a suspicious object later confirmed by them as a sub off Wiseman Head. Went to Action Stations. Despatched duty Fairmile to scene, ordered V/ar/Guard/ patrol to close, warned all ships in harbour, slipped port anchor and got under way to cover inner Harbour between Mill Point and All in the Way Island.

This flurry was followed up at 0600 the 25th by an R.C.A.F. submarine report: but the MLs on the spot made no contacts.

26. By not coming around, the enemy missed his chance at a considerable amount of shipping which passed through PRESERVER's areas. In the last three weeks of October, 16 merchantmen arrived at Botwood, three at Lewisporte; and there were eleven sailings from the two ports. In November, besides single ship movements, a total of eight convoys entered or left the area, including one of five ships from Greenland which was met, far at sea and 36 hours late, by MLs 060 and 077. In addition to the established patrols, all this trade was escorted by at least one ML while in the vicinity of the harbours. Sometimes this duty took the boats as far east as Wabana. On one busy week with all four craft operational, their

voyages worked out to 11.04 hours underway in every 24. PRESERVER's repair organization soon discovered the limits of the Fairmile engines' endurance: 1000 hours running without a "Top Check Up" (complete strip-down and overhaul) was "the limit which should not be exceeded."

27. Very close relations were developed with the other services at Botwood, and the Canadian ship's aid was further extended to the United States Army. An aircraft under charter to the Americans transport command -- the NC 41880 -- had crashed in Botwood harbour (Bay of Exploits) on 3 October. A sling had already been worked around the sunken plane: would PRESERVER come and lift it out? Before the cranes were used, it was a good thing that a letter was acquired from the owners, American Export Airlines, Incorporated:

This authorizes you to proceed with the salvaging of the NC 41880, . . . You are hereby relieved of all liability for any damage to the aircraft in the process of salvaging and from any liability for injury to the men employed by the Contractor. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

PRESERVER's Report of Proceedings for 11 October relates,

. . . After about 60 feet of sling was hove in at a strain of approximately 2 tons the sling came right home having evidently cut through the fuselage. This sling was a length of $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch wire rove through its own part and formed a perfect cutting arrangement.

F.O.N.F. flew out some extra diving gear from St. John's while Warrant Boatswain Lawrence Chaney had his department busy making a lifting sling out of manilla. Everything went smoothly then. On the 15th divers went down to handle the wing and engine assembly; by 1800 PRESERVER made "slinging completed"; and the happy owners got their plane back in two pieces.

28. The event of the Botwood - Lewisporte patrol which generated most paper was the grounding of ML 077 in Job's Cove on 14 November. Lieutenant J.W. Braidwood, R.C.N.V.R., had moored his ship fore and aft there for the regular hydrophone watch. When the wind rose to a moderate south-east gale after midnight, the stern mooring was slipped; at 0600 all hands were called to weigh anchor forward. At 0635 a cable link jammed in the pipe with the anchor hove short. The ML began to drag. Four different engine orders in the next six minutes had no effect. She grounded on the sandy north shore of Job's Cove at 0642 in a short steep sea that prevented the sea boat from being sent away with a kedge. A plain language S.O.S. was made to PRESERVER and ML 059 arrived from Botwood just after high water at 1000. With the tide starting to fall, ML 059 took the strain three times; twice her line snapped, but at 1115 ML 077 was pulled off. She had lost her asdic dome, but as PRESERVER carried plenty of spares, no serious damage had been done.

29. Captain (D) Newfoundland felt that "Some blame must ~~be~~ attributed to the Commanding Officer in that he did not use full power in the first instance" as soon as the ML had begun to drag. But there would be no Inquiry. Commander Johnson defended his subordinate.

It is not considered that a serious error of seamanship was displayed, . . . full ahead would probably have brought the ship's head to the wind but either parted the cable or seriously damaged the windlass. Lieutenant Braidwood considered that movement, but was at that time convinced he could bring the ship out without damage.

D.O.D. in Ottawa then queried the whole affair. Why had a stern anchor been laid in Job's Cove for mooring MLs? It was explained that a fresh water creek in the cove created sufficient seaward current to keep the boat (and her underwater listening apparatus) pointed properly seaward when bridled astern. D.O.D. replied: "I consider that this case is very similar to the [★]grounding of ML 082 in which Commanding Officer Atlantic Coast recommended that the Commanding Officer should receive 'severe displeasure of the Department'." In

★ ML 072 was retired in October 1944, after an explosion in the engine room while alongside at Gaspé left her barely afloat and sent almost half the crew to hospital. There was one death. Two men were very badly injured. This was the thing most feared around the MLs, which burned a high octane gasoline.³⁴

both cases cable gear had been partly responsible for the accident, and it is a captain's duty to see that all his vessel's equipment is working well. However on 9 March 1943, V.C.N.S. noted that the affair was now quite stale -- almost four months old -- if F.O.N.F. were satisfied, so should N.S.H.Q. be. ³⁵ This was concurred in.

30. In the first week of December ship movements at Botwood-Lewisporte fell off to none either way. At 0535 the 8th PRESERVER slipped, and was back at St. John's on the 11th after a couple of days at Harbour Grace.

Winter at St. John's: 1942/43

31. PRESERVER spent the next 7½ months at St. John's, where her duties were: 1) to provide gasoline and bunker fuel for the ML and other Canadian and Allied warships; 2) to maintain the 71st flotilla, now of six craft; 3) to operate the anti-submarine patrols indicated by F.O.N.F.: two MLs on the Wabana patrol relieved every two to five days; and during May 1943, a similar Bay Bulls patrol south of St. John's; 4) occasionally, she had also to provide duty MLs for local duties such as "to screen ships swinging or carrying out gun trials off the Harbour entrance." As usual, there were scattered asdic contacts without results, and on 14 May ML 061 was not able to make an attack on the U-boat she herself saw crossing the entrance to St. John's.

32. In December two parties of Free French naval personnel from St. Pierre visited PRESERVER to inspect her flotilla. The following month three of the Little Ships -- MLs 052, 062 and 063 -- were passed over to the Free French marine forces. They remained under F.O.N.F.'s operational control; and with new crews continued to be based on PRESERVER until July 1943. (This arrangement was made after a French request signalled from London the previous October and approved by the Canadian Naval Board in November. The three craft were returned to the R.C.N. for disposal at the end of the war.)³⁶

33. On 13 May 1943 PRESERVER was secured fore and aft between ~~Nos.~~ 6 and 7 buoys near the south side of St. John's harbour when at noon a sudden 25-knot squall blew up. The Polish destroyer GARLAND was proceeding along PRESERVER's port side at six knots, heading for the vacant mooring space at #8 buoy just ahead. But H.M.C.S. PORT ARTHUR was just leaving quayside; the Pole had to alter to starboard to avoid her, and was unable to regain her head as the gusty wind caught the bow. She did not have far to swing before she struck PRESERVER amidships.³⁷

34. There was little damage to the ship from this light glancing blow, and #25 repaired PRESERVER's motor boat which had been caught between the two ships. However, the jolt broke the mooring swivel of #7 buoy, and PRESERVER started to swing around on her stern mooring, threatening to cut a swath through the nearby closely-packed lines of ships at anchor. But

her agile O.O.D. let go forward with the anchor prepared for such emergencies, then slipped the stern mooring which would otherwise have held the ship untenably thwartwind. When the anchor held, PRESERVER found herself installed in a new berth to starboard and downwind from her original one -- the space SS COMMANANT DORISE had been occupying, in fact, until that merchantman had eased out of the way in anticipation of the Depot Ship's post-collision evolutions.

35. ML 063, secured alongside PRESERVER to starboard, was not so deft. She "was tardy in slipping", and was "squeezed heavily between PRESERVER and the DORISE, whose prompt action in slackening the cable minimized the damage." Eighty man-hours were necessary to repair the French MLs "planking split in hull" and "completely smashed" cabin.

36. Many of this collision's circumstances were repeated the following winter, on 3 March 1944.³⁸ PRESERVER, again sitting out the 'tween-seasons moored in St. John's harbour, was rammed port side by H.M. Tug GROWLER who was coming alongside to fuel from the Canadian ship. Again the damage was minimal -- \$150. The cause of both incidents was the same -- the unwonted influx of wartime shipping that glutted St. John's (as it did all the East Coast ports); the little space of open water, which was all that could be found there at the best of times, was transformed into rows of bulky ships riding to buoys and waiting to be bumped.

Red Bay: August - November 1943

37. In the summer of 1943 PRESERVER finally entered upon the employment F.O.N.F. had scheduled for her the previous year. Trading the 71st Flotilla for the 72nd, she sailed from St. John's at the end of July with the six MLs, H.M.C.S. TROIS-RIVIÈRES (Minesweeper), 178,603 gallons of 87 octane gasoline³⁹ and a water boat.⁴⁰ On 2 August she arrived at Red Bay, Labrador, to operate an anti-submarine service from that distant and inhospitable inlet.

38. The Strait of Belle Isle sees a lot of traffic in peacetime. The Montreal and Quebec liners and the freighters bearing to Europe the products of the Great Lakes country and beyond, regularly take this passage. During the Second War, however, this shipping was diverted through Sydney and Halifax. From there it passed into the Atlantic south of Newfoundland; the shortest great circle to Europe was near Cape Race. Once in a while an ocean convoy -- SC37, for instance, out of Sydney on 12 July 1941 -- would be directed north through the Gulf of St. Lawrence; but when SC37's escort H.M.S. AURANIA (Armed Merchant Cruiser)⁴¹ struck an iceberg in the Strait of Belle Isle it did not encourage repetitions of the experiment. And of course, if Belle Isle -- a narrow funnel -- were

used, it would become an attractive focus for U-boat [★] depredations. Thus even when PRESERVER and her MLs were maintaining anti-submarine defences in the area from mid-1943 on, the trans-ocean trade continued to be routed elsewhere.

39. Very occasionally the Quebec-Montreal portion of a returning ON or ONS convoy might be detached, if the way were clear, to proceed through ⁴³ the Strait directly to its destinations. But generally the traffic which used Belle Isle during PRESERVER's attendance there consisted of: 1) convoys (LN, NL) which shuttled every two weeks between Quebec and Goose Bay, in connection with the Northeast Staging Route developments in Labrador; 2) less regular convoys between North America and Greenland (SG, GS); ⁴⁴ and 3) Newfoundland coastal shipping. PRESERVER's assignment was to protect these merchant vessels in the vicinity of the Strait. Ships in need of fuel or assistance also could apply to her. More vital, she was to keep the Gulf of St. Lawrence's northern gate, and stop or report any U-boat that might head through to attack the shipping passing between Quebec and Cape Breton.

★ Three sinkings took place in the area during the war, when U-517 and U-165 contacted a Sydney-Greenland convoy in late August 1942.⁴²

40. Red Bay was the bleakest place PRESERVER would ever visit. It hardly merited even the very modest title of "outport". Situated on the Labrador coast half-way along the 75-mile Belle Isle passage, it was 30 miles northeast of the 9-mile narrows opposite Forteau Bay. Westward all the way to Hudson's Bay stretched an unbroken, unvisited wilderness. PRESERVER selected her station; and described to F.O.N.F. what might be called her domestic arrangements.

The best anchorage is in the centre of the Basin in 16 fathoms, mud bottom.... The first mooring system adopted was - two bower anchors dropped on a NW and NE bearing respectively and a third bower with 45 fathoms chain cable at the water was dropped bearing South and hove astern to the after mooring winch by two 3½-inch wire hawsers. . . . The stern anchor dragged during a SW squall on October 31 and was slipped as the ship and four attached vessels were dragging rapidly when the wind was broadside. . . . After deciding that a fixed mooring was impracticable, it was proved that in all but an unusual Southerly wind, the 4-inch Gun could command the entrance, as the South-going stream from the rivers tailed the ship that way in a calm. On the rare occasions when the 4-inch Gun did not command the Basin entrance, the Engine Room Watch was closed up. A buoyed mooring for a stern wire is recommended; this should be so placed that the stern can be hove round to bring the after gun to bear on the harbour entrance. A duty ML was moored on a slip line in the Harbour and assumed the duties of Guard ship from sunset to sunrise. She joined the Striking Force when required.

41. The arrival of the Belle Isle Force tripled the population at Red Bay.

A fishing settlement is situated on this Bay comprising 33 families or about 140 inhabitants who make a scratchy living by cod fishing for three months in the year. The people are industrious, kindly and appreciative. They are entirely without medical assistance, the nearest Doctor being at St. Anthony's, 62 miles distance. A Grenfell nurse is in residence at Forteau

Bay, . . PRESERVER's Medical Officer held two afternoon clinics weekly and saw patients from the outports on any afternoon, cases were treated, some with major ailments and many with dental defects.

Tied to this hamlet for several months, the navy was thrown upon its own resources for morale-boosting diversions. There was the occasional ball game; classes for promotion; "mediocre trout fishing in company with swarms of flies"; and a round-robin of whaler races among 17 volunteer crews.

42. The local folk were friendly -- "kindly and appreciative" -- all but one stiff-necked clique. Commander Johnson complained about them to F.O.N.F. on 15 August:

Canadian Government telegraph operators here and district Superintendent Quebec decline to dispatch telegram without mentioning office of origin in Plain Language. Request efforts be made to change this ruling.⁴⁵

One ML's crew established so firm a rapport ashore that they became recipients of three "shiny-white Eskimo Husky pups." The lack of excitements and amenities to be found on the shores of Belle Isle Strait were summed up: "We hardly ever went ashore, but when we did we were glad to get back to the boats."⁴⁶ "There was a marked lessening of efficiency and willingness," reported Commanding Officer PRESERVER in recommending a four to six-week maximum assignment for vessels on the Belle Isle Patrol, "after five weeks of the monotony."

43. During the 1943 summer PRESERVER established three routine anti-submarine patrols in the 1200 square mile sea-area of the Strait. The first instituted, and most important, was an Eastern patrol at the Atlantic entrance. A 24-hour cruising watch was kept, principally by TROIS-RIVIÈRES, and after 20 September by His Norwegian Majesty's Ship KONG HAAKON VII[★] which replaced the minesweeper in the Belle Isle Force. The summer's only serious alert soon caused this programme to be stiffened. The first warning came from F.O.N.F. on 13 August: a U-boat was headed in from sea. The next day:

Information now believed reliable.
Maintain special alert operations
during next fourteen days to prevent
westerly movements.

On receipt of FONF's 141629 August the Western Patrol was established and was carried out nightly by 2 ML's at the Western entrance of the Straits from two hours before sunset to 30 minutes after sunrise. This system was not efficient and was changed to a constant patrol, maintained by one ML sweeping and listening in the vicinity of the Western entrance to the Strait. At least 2 ML's and generally three, were at all times ready as a Striking Force.⁴⁸

★ The HAAKON was an ex-American Patrol Craft, 335 tons, 173 feet overall, 20 knots, with two 3-inch guns, two 20 mm. Oerlikons and two Depth/Charge throwers. The Senior Norwegian Naval Officer in Norway's Washington embassy, in communication with the London-based Government-in-exile, approved her allocations. Between 1942 and 1945 the Norwegian vessel alternated between F.O.N.F.'s operational control and that of the American Commander Gulf of Mexico Sea Frontier.⁴⁷

No U-boat put in an appearance, and as no ships were torpedoed inside the Gulf during the 1943 navigation season it is likely that PRESERVER's defences were not penetrated. The extra western patrol was not abandoned with the end of F.O.N.F.'s alert. By mid-October the firmly set routine was:

- 1) a night patrol at the Strait's western entrance;
- 2) The eastern (seaward) patrol. KING HAAKON VII had inherited from TROIS-RIVIÈRES a schedule of five days on and 30 hours off, but this was found too arduous, especially for the asdic ratings.

According to the final arrangement the larger vessel spent four days on patrol instead of five, and was relieved by two MLs for 30-hour spell; 3) there was also a "central patrol" maintained in the Strait by one ML as weather allowed.

44. October was when the weather allowed least. During five separate 48-hour periods in that month seas were too high for the tiny MLs to proceed from Red Bay -- "sufficient", as PRESERVER reported once, "to swamp a whale boat riding to a buoy on a 12-foot painter" inside the anchorage. The season was very short.

By 27 October

. . .after a still night, the basin was almost completely frozen over with a thin sheet of ice; this lasted until about noon when the increasing wind and temperature caused it to disperse.

It was not until the following June and July, however, that the men of the Belle Isle Force saw how fiercely summer had to fight for its brief, bleak predominance, which seemed to be ended for this year.

45. Despite the early freezing it was Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic and not the weather that chased PRESERVER and her outfit from Red Bay five weeks before Christmas. Halifax asked St. John's how long the Belle Isle Force would be kept on station. The answer was until 1 December, weather permitting, a date F.O.N.F. suggested "in view of some independent shipping continuing after the last convoy, such as Railway steamers carrying passengers, and the presence of U-boats in Newfoundland waters." C-in-C C.N.A. replied: "Reasons appreciated. However unless definite indications U-boats operating near area during next week would prefer to withdraw patrol 15 November."⁴⁹ PRESERVER sailed at 0400 19 November, towing the water-boat which had been supplying the Base Ship and Flotilla's needs with eight 20-ton loads weekly from Red Bay's fresh water stream. KONG HAARON VII was also in company. At 0955 on the 21st PRESERVER secured to Nos. 3 and 4 buoys at St. John's.

46. The R.C.N. ships were 101 days on station at Red Bay in 1943. In addition to the regular anti-submarine watches, 16 convoys had been seen safely through the Strait, plus many single vessels -- especially fishing craft -- navigating more leisurely. "On each passage a sweep was made five miles ahead by the Striking Force." Several vessels, including ships of the R.C.N. had taken advantage of PRESERVER's being at Red Bay to refuel from her there;

and besides maintaining the MLs in good repair, the Base Ship had been able to give practical assistance to passing merchantmen who needed it.

47. Commanding Officer PRESERVER had specific recommendations for improving the service at Belle Isle. First,

Motor Launches are not suitable for patrol service in the Straits of Belle Isle. When the wind reaches Force three [7-10 knots] and if against the variable and inconstant 3 knot current, the sea becomes sufficiently confused to prevent Asdic reception.

What was wanted (for the anti-submarine patrols) was two corvettes or else two vessels like the HAAKON; plus two minesweepers for a sweeping routine and to relieve the others one day in five. No ship should be stationed there for more than six weeks at a stretch. Further, a giant radar with its own power should be installed on Saddle Island at the entrance to Red Bay, and the same location should become the nerve-centre and control-post for a network of listening hydrophones mounted underwater at various strategic spots up and down the Strait.

48. The Commander-in-Chief, Canadian North Atlantic, minuted this report:

. . . Generally concurred in, but it was always appreciated that ML's would not be able to establish 100% protection against submarines entering the Belle Isle Straits . . . it is considered that the Belle Isle Force fulfilled a very useful function during the summer of 1943, and carried out its duties with efficiency. 50

And another officer commented:

Our resources, as usual, are strained. The period is critical and it is therefore impossible to form a reasoned judgment whether to build more and what to build. In our hearts we are counting on beating the Germans this year; if we don't we'll have to pull back our scattered ships and inaugurate a new building programme; in the meantime there is justification for disposing our forces for 1944 in much the same way that we did for 1943. 51

Winter 1943-1944

49. As forecast, PRESERVER's second full year of war service was substantially a copy of 1943. Now under the command of Commander G. Borrie, R.D., R.C.N.R., she did not stir from St. John's until the end of April 1944. Although the 77th IIL Flotilla was in the harbour to carry out the same type of winter duties as PRESERVER's 71st Flotilla had done the year before, this time F.O.N.F. kept operational control of the IILs. They berthed at the jetty, while PRESERVER continued to supply them fuel and repairs. In addition to the Fairmiles, she fuelled an average of 18 other H.M.C. Ships per month.

50. The enemy continued to prowl in the Atlantic. On 9 February the 7000-ton Britisher KELMSCOTT was torpedoed only one and a half hours out of St. John's. She was eventually towed in, after an IIL rescued her crew; contact with the U-boat was not made.⁵² So the Allied war on U-boats, though brightening, had not yet forced them away from

Canadian coastal waters. The Ottawa R.C.N. conference on trade in the St. Lawrence easily decided that PRESERVER would be needed at Red Bay again.

On 24 April, de-ammunitioned and de-fuelled, PRESERVER made passage to Bay Bulls for refit. She spent two weeks in drydock there. Then final preparations were made at St. John's for the summer's operations. On 11 June she cleared for Red Bay with H.M.C.S. ESQUIMAULT. The 76th Flotilla of MLs would be attached to PRESERVER at Red Bay, after sweeping the Gulf ahead of the year's first convoy to Goose Bay.

Back to Belle Isle: Summer 1944

52. "Many icebergs and growlers observed in Belle Isle Straits", was PRESERVER's impression at evening twilight on the 14th; but she pushed through to anchor with ESQUIMAULT at Red Bay at noon the next day. The six craft of the 76th Flotilla arrived alongside from Gaspé two hours later. Luckily the Force had arrived while the ice was out. It soon closed in again, solid floes and lofty bergs drawing 25 fathoms, pieces of Baffin Island that every spring press down the Labrador coast to split up on Newfoundland's northern point. Now for several weeks Arctic remnants of the winter just ended continued to crowd into the Gulf of St. Lawrence via Belle Isle Strait. With the ice came indescribable fogs.

Weather-watching and ice-reporting became an important adjunct to PRESERVER's duties: as long as these conditions stayed severe, in fact, this job became about the only one she was able to perform. Her twice-daily messages to F.O.N.F. and interested shipping told the tale of two seasons struggling at Belle Isle.

53. On the evening of the day PRESERVER arrived: "Main pack blocking the entrance" to Red Bay. "Frequent abortive attempts have been made to dispatch ML reconnaissance patrols to obtain ice reports," she reported on 17 June. "Am now completely ice-bound." The ice came majestically and endlessly on, easing southward at one knot interspersed with brief spaces of open water: on the 19th a grinding, groaning field extending five miles from the Labrador shore. "Visibility off Red Bay zero," was the report on 26 June; and ⁵³ten days later it was the same; even at the height of summer, on 24 July, ML 103 had to rush off to escort SS. LEONIDAS CONDYLUS to Corner Brook, after the Greek merchantmen had struck an iceberg near Cape Bauld.

54. During the first week of PRESERVER's arrival on station, Convoy LN 22 -- seven vessels bound from the St. Lawrence to Goose Bay under escort of H.M.C. Ships VANCOUVER, BUCTOUCHE and QUESNEL -- made a hazardous passage. On 18 June, five days out from Quebec and forewarned of conditions by PRESERVER's messages, these vessels filed into Forteau Bay to anchor. They sortied next day, but the ice

pushed them back. Three more days they waited, the merchantmen's water and fuel dwindling while the R.C.N. ships dodged 30 miles along to Red Bay to refuel from PRESERVER.⁵⁴ Watching its chance, on the 22nd LN 22 got underway again, passed the Strait, and at noon next day stopped 120 miles north-east of Red Bay on the seaward edge of an ice-field that stretched all the way from the Labrador coast well below the horizon. When VANCOUVER received permission to turn back to St. John's, she ignored it. Her charges were herded through the thick pack making 16 miles a day, and all reached the mouth of Hamilton Inlet on the 28th.⁵⁵

55. In 1944 traffic through the Strait was heavier and the Belle Isle Force's anti-submarine routine lighter than in the previous year. In the first of this year's three periods that PRESERVER spent in Labrador/^{lasting} until 22 August -- ten convoys and more than 70 independent ships made passage between the Gulf and the ocean. For non-emergency purposes it was thought sufficient to institute only one patrol on a daily basis. The Eastern patrol to seaward between Barge Point and Cape Norman, Newfoundland was maintained by ESQUIMALT or by two MLs. At night or when ice and fog made it unwise to move about unnecessarily in the Strait, the ships on this duty anchored in Black Bay and kept hydrophone listening watch. On 2 July ESQUIMALT, who had briefly run aground three days earlier,⁵⁶ had to be temporarily detached to St. John's; and F.O.N.F. directed:

. . . in the absence of Bangor Minesweeper from Red Bay, a 48-hour sweep by the entire ML flotilla is to take place once weekly through the Straits.

56. Nothing that resembled a U-boat was contacted. On 30 June F.O.N.F. warned of a suspicious craft near the island of Belle Isle. PRESERVER's MLs followed up this lead, but all they found was a swarm of fishing boats and fog.⁵⁷ It was so discouraging that the Red Bay personnel gave up hope of ever meeting the enemy on this front and began preparing for the war's next phase: for in the interests of morale PRESERVER reported that not only classes in engineering, navigation, signals and gunnery were being conducted, but "A Language Class in Japanese is also functioning. Ship's Company is showing a keen interest."

57. On 22 August PRESERVER was ordered to Corner Brook in company with the 78th Flotilla which had replaced the 76th at Red Bay on 12 July. She stayed at Corner Brook, secured alongside, for five weeks. The MLs passed under the operational control of Naval Officer in Charge, Sydney, who

desired to keep the Flotilla at immediate notice rather than permit them to exercise as a flotilla underway, with the attendant danger of units becoming defective at a time the whole Flotilla may be required. 58

F.O.N.F. was critical of this scheme (over which he had no control), recommending as a general rule that an ML flotilla should always be

either exercised periodically or allocated to some specific operational duty. It is considered injurious to morale for ML's to be kept idle.⁵⁹

58. The method which Captain (MLs) at Halifax adopted in 1944 for keeping Fairmile crews fresh was the designation of the 79th as a relief flotilla. This unit arrived at Corner Brook from Gaspé on 14 September to join PRESERVER for two weeks while the 78th went to refit and exercises. The latter flotilla was almost due back at Corner Brook when on 26 September C-in-C C.N.A. ordered PRESERVER to return forthwith to Red Bay. She was to keep two MLs in company for her own protection. "Balance of the 79th Flotilla is to proceed to Strait of Belle Isle at best speed" to "establish anti-submarine screen for convoy NL 28 consisting of 6 ships at anchor in Forteau Bay." PRESERVER made haste and next day -- the 27th -- she was able to reply, "Arrived destination . . . **balance** of 79th Flotilla now screening NL.28...⁶⁰ Instructed by me to report to Red Bay upon relief."

59. These hurried dispositions were the result of a U-boat scare in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. On 6 September, ML 055 had obtained a firm asdic contact just west of Cap des Rosiers on the Gaspé shore. The target gave echoes and doppler effect, showing movement. No hydrophone effect was heard. ML 055 called

in three of her partners and they attacked the target for several hours before breaking off. From the reports C-in-C C.N.A. calculated it had probably⁶¹ not been a submarine, and not worth chasing -- except this was 1944, not 1942. The Allies had gained an upper hand over the U-boats all over the ocean; in addition to semi-defensive escort squadrons, there were now available roving Support Groups, whose mission was to hunt and kill submarines without being tied to the protection of particular merchantmen at the same time; Halifax thought that a sweep of the Gulf by one of these groups might now be a profitable idea. Certainly the U-boats were long overdue, not having attacked the Quebec-Sydney trade for almost two years. And there were ships to spare to hunt the hunter. On 8 September the Canadian Support Group EG-16^{*} was ordered into the St. Lawrence estuary to make a thorough search seaward.⁶³ This force methodically probed every corner of the Gulf without making a contact, and towards the end of the month was working its way out to sea through the Strait of Belle Isle. C-in-C C.N.A. was concentrating PRESERVER's "Belle Isle Force II" and the escort assigned to NL 28 to cooperate with the dragnet which the frigates were casting.

* In August 1944 the members of EG-16 were H.M.C. Ships SPRINGHILL (Senior Officer), CHARLOTTETOWN, MAGOG, STETTLER, TORONTO, LA HULLOISE and ORKNEY. In mid-September STE. THERESE and THETFORD MINES were added to EG-16, but on the 29th as the group left the Belle Isle these two vessels with LA HULLOISE and ORKNEY were detached to form the bulk of a new support Group, EG-25.⁶²

60. PRESERVER conducted operations in conjunction with the Support Group for only three days. Her directive from F.O.N.F. issued on 27 September read:

During operation of EG-16 within straits. . . continuous sweep on patrol line is not to be carried out. ML's are to proceed to sea as a flotilla coming under orders of EG-16. Duration of sorties to be at your discretion.

However, Senior Officer EG-16 radioed at 2100 that evening that the Group was already 65 miles from Red Bay to the north of Cape Bauld. F.O.N.F. countermanded his previous order: "All MLs are not to be absent from Straits when EG-16 is operating east of Belle Isle or west of the 57th meridian." ⁶⁴ Besides these two Submarine-hunting forces -- PRESERVER's and EG-16 -- the 78th ML Flotilla also passed into the area from Gaspe on 28-29 September to rejoin the Belle Isle patrol.

61. However, just at this time PRESERVER's refrigerator plant broke down. The ship stored six months' supply of food. The previous spring the freezer had been repaired at St. John's, but it continued to give trouble after PRESERVER arrived at Red Bay in June. Two MLs made the long voyage to Botwood in mid-July to fetch 150 pounds of freon gas ⁶⁵ to replace leakages; a week later a civilian repairman had to be flown out from St. John's for five days' work. "Some difficulty was incurred early this month with refrigeration," PRESERVER's Medical Officer reported in August.

The mechanism for the plant broke down and fear was held for adequate preservation of food aboard. However, an ingenious mechanic device was constructed by the Engineering Department which provided a sufficiently cold temperature to amply preserve the food until parts were received. Fatty foods have had a rancid like taste which has become more definite the last two months.

On 29 September "a perforated condenser coil resulted in flooding the freon gas system with water."

PRESERVER suggested she return to Corner Brook to store the 11,000 pounds of fresh beef she had on hand. F.O.N.F. directed her to his Headquarters base, however, and complained to Ottawa:

This has had serious operational repercussions involving withdrawal of the Belle Isle patrol at a time when there is a strong indication of enemy activity in that locality.⁶⁶

62. PRESERVER left Red Bay on 30 September, while the 79th Flotilla returned to Gaspé and the 78th accompanied her as escort to St. John's. After three weeks in refit in the main Newfoundland base she was ready to return to the Strait. She anchored in the familiar spot at Red Bay on 23 October, and continued with anti-submarine work there until 11 November. Now there were definite U-boat operations in the Gulf. The frigate H.M.C.S. MAGOG was torpedoed ^{*} off Pointe des Monts well above Anticosti on 16 October, and the S.S. FORT THOMPSON was hit much farther upriver two weeks later.⁶⁷ But nothing came PRESERVER's way.

* By U-1223 (Oberleutnant zur See S. Kneip). Three of her company were killed. Both this ship and the FORT THOMPSON stayed afloat and were towed to Quebec.

63. On 11 November she shifted her patrols and manoeuvres from Red Bay for the last time, and sailed for Corner Brook. The water-boat she had been using during the summer was lost at sea during the passage. At 2023 on the 11th PRESERVER's after lookout reported the tow had parted. In a high sea and swell "the tow line was unable to stand the frequent extra strains put upon it despite parcelling which had been done prior to commencing tow." MLs 110 and 111 were detached to find the derelict. They located it, water-logged, next morning, and towed it for awhile before it sank in 40 fathoms five miles off the southern headland of Bonne Bay. F.O.N.F. was critical of Commanding Officer PRESERVER's handling of the incident, calling it

. . . unsatisfactory, in that knowing that the tow had parted at approximately 2323z on the 11th November, 1944, he did not turn his ship about with a view to taking personal control of the operation salvaging the barge.⁶⁸

64. PRESERVER's MLs were keeping anti-submarine watch at Corner Brook and in spacious nearby Bay of Islands when on ²⁵ November the corvette SHAWINIGAN was torpedoed by U-1228 (Oberleutnant F.W. Marienfeld) just 100 miles to the south, and lost with all hands.⁶⁹ Three weeks later, released from her Corner Brook post, the Depot Ship headed for Sydney, Halifax and refit. Leaving the Newfoundland port on 16 December, that night she passed over the spot where SHAWINIGAN must have gone down. On 20 December she moored in Bedford Basin, Halifax, waiting her turn in the Halifax Shipyards Company's floating drydock.

65. Halifax was a bigger, even busier port than St. John's where PRESERVER had spent the past two winters. On 2 January 1945 the British Ministry of War Transport's 10,000-ton EMPIRE BALFOUR dragged her anchor and poked her bow against PRESERVER's starboard midship section. The ship's bow was smashed, its davits sheared off and upper deck fittings in the vicinity generally made unserviceable. C-in-C C.N.A. had no hesitation in blaming Captain T.H. Bull of the British ship "to full extent".⁷⁰

66. The affair's most interesting aspect is the post-collision documentation. The chief items of correspondence are:

- 30 January 1945, from A.N.C.S: "Is there any question of a claim against the EMPIRE BALFOUR?"
- 31 January, Hydrographer to D.J.A.F: "Consider this a possibility."
- 17 March, Deputy Minister (Naval Service) to Deputy Minister, Department of Justice: "... appreciate your advice as to whether the Department can assert a valid claim. . . ."
- 18 May, DM Justice to DM (NS): "It is not possible for me to express an unqualified opinion as to the merits of the Crown's position with regard to a claim based on the alleged negligence in the operation of S.S. "Empire Balfour". The rule is that prima facie a vessel which drags her anchor is presumed to be negligent. This presumption may be rebutted, however, by evidence showing that the vessel dragged her anchor notwithstanding that all reasonable precautions were taken. The information furnished to me does not deal with the latter point. The only opinion that I can express, therefore, is that the Crown in right of Canada would, if the claim were against a subject, have a prima facie claim for payment of the cost of repairs to H.M.C.S. "Preserver" but that this claim might be answered by further evidence. . . . /but/ the Crown in right of Canada cannot have a legal claim against the Crown in

right of the United Kingdom. If the officers and crew were furnished by the Ministry of War Transport and are servants of the Crown in right of the United Kingdom, the Crown in right of Canada has no legal claim. If on the other hand the officers and crew of the vessel are employees of the operator, the Crown in right of Canada would have a legal claim against the operator in respect of the negligence of their [sic] servants. I might add that I understand that it is sometimes the practice in the United Kingdom for the Crown in right of the United Kingdom to permit an action against the master of a vessel vested in the Crown with a view to the determination of the liability, and if it is determined against the Crown the amount of the judgment against the master is then paid by the Crown.

Having regard to the foregoing it would be in order, I think, to put forward a claim to the Ministry of War Transport in an endeavour to obtain further information and also to ascertain the position which would be taken by the Ministry of War Transport in the event that it develops that the claim, if any, is a claim for payment from the Crown in right of the United Kingdom.

- 23 May 1945, DM (NS) to Cunard White Star Limited, Halifax agent for Messrs. Elders and Fyffe, operators of SS EMPIRE BALFOUR on behalf of the Ministry of War Transport:

"The Department has come to the conclusion that the damage which was occasioned occurred solely through the negligence and want of skill of the Master of the S.S. "EMPIRE BALFOUR" or those in charge of her for whom he is responsible. The bill is \$1888.53 . . . appreciated if arrangements could be made for settlement of this amount at your early convenience.

By 12 September, Elders and Fyffe in England, in answer to query from Ottawa, wrote that everything had been referred to the Solicitor of the British Treasury. ⁷¹

67. PRESERVER proceeded into drydock at Halifax from 20-25 January. Defects new and old were remedied, including a change-over in the refrigerating gear from "blower system to panel system." On 14 February, 1945

she sailed for St. John's, and arrived there on the 17th to complete the circumnavigation of Newfoundland she had begun the previous October. The 78th Flotilla was attached to her for maintenance and administration, remaining under the operational control of F.O.N.F.⁷² Regular anti-submarine patrols -- an inner and an outer one, in conjunction with the several minesweepers stationed at St. John's -- then continued. On 1st April 1945 Lieutenant-Commander H.C. Walmesley, RCNR, assumed command of PRESERVER.

68. From 27 April she was at Corner Brook again. Under N.O.I.C. Sydney's direction the ILS carried out 24-hour asdic watch in Bay of Islands. At midnight 9 May this patrol was withdrawn and Commanding Officer PRESERVER, who had been reading the Halifax papers, wrote in his Report of Proceedings,

The ship's company conducted itself with exemplary restraint during V/E day celebrations and elicited most favourable comment from officials and the press in Corner Brook. It is notable that on this occasion there was no occurrence which necessitated disciplinary action of even the most minor nature.

On 10 May she sailed in turbulent weather southabout towards St. John's.

69. U-190 (Oberleutnant zur See H.E. Reith) had arrived off the Nova Scotia south shore in mid-March 1945. In the approaches to Halifax on 16 April she hit H.M.C.S. ESQUIMALT with an acoustic torpedo. The minesweeper who had been PRESERVER's partner on the Red Bay watch the previous summer sank quickly with the loss

of 39 officers and men. Then the U-boat stood to sea, and on 11 May received from its German Headquarters a garbled version of the directions to surrender to the Allies. Broadcasting its position and proceeding surfaced towards Cape Race, the submarine was met and boarded next evening by H.M.C. Ships VICTORIAVILLE and THORLOCK. Two days before PRESERVER's arrival at Bay Bulls MLs 095 and 098 with Captain (D) Newfoundland embarked had met the prize off the harbour and helped escort her in.⁷³ Thus U-190 was the dark low,⁷⁴ "barnacle-covered, rusty and salt-spotted" vessel which PRESERVER sighted at her dawn arrival. On 3 June PRESERVER's MLs 100, 103 and 111 formed part of the triumphant escort that took the German prize into St. John's.⁷⁵

Retirement: Summer 1945

70. PRESERVER had left Bay Bulls two days before. She deposited 38,000 gallons of gasoline at Gaspé on 4 June and arrived at Quebec on the 7th. Here the ship's company was "to assist NOIC. Quebec in decommissioning surplus MLs." Sixty-three of the motor launches were declared surplus on 16 June.⁷⁶ They arrived at Quebec from the various Eastern outports in flotillas of four or six and were de-gassed to a strict safety standard before being towed in two's and three's up to Sorel. PRESERVER sailed for Gaspé 26 July and en route dumped unwanted but secret asdic gear -- 43 domes and 56 alternators which had been removed from the retiring MLs -- in 160 fathoms at 48° 58' North, 63° 52' West.⁷⁷

71. Then the ship sailed to Sydney, Halifax and Sydney again, reallocating the fuels and gear from the Gaspé naval base, which was closing down, and de-storing ship. Finally the big tanks were emptied and steam-cleaned. On 5 September at Sydney she was paid off. When Lieutenant-Commander Walmesley left her on the 17th, she became H.M.C.S. PROTECTOR's charge for care and maintenance.

Comeback: Bermuda in October

72. Just one week after ending her first commission, PRESERVER had to be put briefly back into service. A substitute tanker and storeship was required to finish the assignment which the second Fairmile Depot Ship -- H.M.C.S. PROVIDER -- had undertaken. Now, however, the shutting down of H.M.C.S. SOMERS ISLES was being retarded because PROVIDER, who was to carry the gear back home, had lost a propellor and shaft there on 19 September. N.S.H.Q. ordered, "PRESERVER to be sailed to Bermuda as soon as possible to aid in return of stores and personnel to Canada."⁷⁸

73. At Sydney on 25 September Lieutenant-Commander Walmesley re-commissioned his ship, put a crew into her and rushed essential naval stores back on board. Next day at noon she sailed. From 1 to 7 October she loaded every type of naval equipment, fuels and lubricants now no longer needed. It was briefly considered at Headquarters during this period whether PRESERVER might not be the better Base Supply Ship to keep in the navy, letting PROVIDER go instead.

C.N.E.C.'s memorandum of 29 September read,

. . . It was proposed to retain H.M.C.S. PROVIDER in service and dispose of H.M.C.S. PRESERVER. An order has been raised from this Branch for new propellers and shafts, but the question has been raised by Deputy Minister's Office regarding -

- (a) Will PRESERVER now be retained in place of PROVIDER?
- (b) If one ship is kept, for how long?⁷⁹

His own recommendation was to keep PROVIDER -- the "later and better ship of the two." N.S.H.Q. confirmed this on 11 October: PROVIDER was to pay off into the maintenance reserve, and PRESERVER was to be disposed of again, for good.⁸⁰

74. When this message arrived PRESERVER was already back in Halifax. On 8 October she slipped at Bermuda with H.M.C.S. KIRKWOOD in tow. For several hours on the 10th and again on the 12th, she stopped in the water while a sea-boat pulled back to the empty KIRKWOOD to adjust the tow or pump her out. The passage was completed when she anchored off George's Island, Halifax, in the evening of 12 October. After sailing to Shelburne to complete de-storing she paid off there on the 24th.

75. PRESERVER was passed over to War Assets Corporation on 4 January 1946. In April her builders, Marine Industries, Limited purchased her "where is, as i in June she was in the hands of German and Milne Company, who informed the Naval Secretary they were acting as agents for the Government of Peru. Now the dutiful tanker from the Labrador coast hit the newspapers for the first time -- in Spanish. On 25 June

1946 the South American Republic's legislature passed a "Supreme Resolution" concerning her acquisition. It was signed by President Labarthe, printed in La Prensa of Lima and translated by External Affairs for N.S.H.Q. A Peruvian naval mission headed by Captain Ismael Otárola and two lieutenant-commanders arrived in Canada to accept the ship, occasioning "some embarrassment due to the fact that the R.C.N. was represented by a Sub-Lieutenant."⁸¹ Someone had made all the arrangements to have PRESERVER brought up from Shelburne to Sorel and commissioned into the Peruvian Government Marine there, but nobody had thought to give advance notice to the R.C.N. A junior officer from the Montreal reserve division⁸² was rushed off to the ceremony at the last minute.

76. She became the MARISCAL CASTILLA, and in the spring of 1947 returned to Halifax with fuel and ships' companies for ex-H.M.C. Ships ST. FIERRE and POUNDMAKER who were following PRESERVER into the⁸³ Peruvian service. Jane's Fighting Ships in 1960-1961 showed her as the Peruvian Navy's CABO BLANCO.⁸⁴ She was scrapped in 1961.⁸⁵

Evaluation

77. "In the light of later events it is evident that Canada, in a sense, was defeated in the St. Lawrence in 1942."⁸⁶ The Naval Historian's remark refers to the U-boat successes of that year. He reached this conclusion by considering how grievously the trade of St. Lawrence ports fell off during the

whole second half of the war. On account of R.C.N. measures to protect coastal waters, however, matters did not get steadily worse as they might otherwise have done. From 1943 on, growing R.C.N. forces of greater efficiency made a good attempt to seal off the Gulf of St. Lawrence from enemy prowlers, and to protect the shipping within it. The more exposed Atlantic ports of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia were also defended. The increased security of coastal trade following the 1942 debacle indicated the efficacy of these measures. The history of H.M.C.S. PRESERVER shows their daily detail and their inescapably dull routine.

78. She was a very independent ship, establishing herself where the navy had not been before and creating by her presence the dockyard and storehouse needed to permit local operations against the foe. Her own stern gun, with the Flotilla's asdic and depth-charges, became the port defences of the harbours she visited. Barring materiel defects, she could have steamed (at nine knots) anywhere on the globe and supported a wide variety of naval activity.

79. This report was prepared by Malcolm MacLeod.

D. J. Goodspeed, HMC
(C.P. Stacey)
Director of History

COMMANDING OFFICERS OF HMCS PRESERVER

11 July 1942 to 16 December 1943	Commander B.L. Johnson, RCNR
16 December 1943 to 18 April 1945	Commander G. Borrie, RD, RCNR
18 April 1945 to 17 September 1945	Lieutenant-Commander H.C. Walmsley, RCNR
25 September 1945 to 6 November 1945	Lieutenant-Commander H.C. Walmsley, RCNR

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