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Through the Camera's Lens Scenes from Aboard the Frigate HMCS *Dunver*, 1943-1945

Cliff Quince and Serge Durflinger

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest and most important maritime campaign of the Second World War. Germany's large and powerful submarine fleet menaced the merchant vessels carrying the essential supplies upon which depended the survival of Great Britain and, ultimately, the liberation of Western Europe. The campaign was also one of the most vicious and unforgiving of the war, where little quarter was possible and rarely given. The harsh elements also exacted a heavy toll. Canada, which possessed only a tiny navy in 1939, nevertheless became a key participant in the struggle. For the thousands of Canadians engaged in this desperate battle, life aboard the escort ships of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) ran the gamut of experiences and emotions: camaraderie, boredom, hardship, discomfort, anxiety, fear, death.

The following photographs constitute a vivid visual account of life and equipment aboard a Canadian escort ship in the North Atlantic in the years 1943-45. Together they tell part of the story of one of the RCN's River-class anti-submarine frigates, HMCS *Dunver*. The frigate program proved the single most important Canadian warship-building effort of the war and these photos reflect conditions aboard one of the first frigates to enter service. But the images also stand as a representative sampling of the wartime experiences of tens of thousands of Canadian sailors serving aboard other frigates and ships of other classes. The photos are published through the courtesy of Mr. Clifford Quince, who snapped them while serving aboard *Dunver* as a young able seaman. Cliff acted as



the ship's unofficial photographer until February 1945 at which time the navy granted him a formal photographer's pass. This pass did not make him an official RCN photographer, since he maintained all his shipboard duties; it merely enabled him to take photos as he saw fit.

Born in Montreal in 1925, Cliff came by his knack for photography honestly. His father was a photographer who served in the artillery and recorded aspects of service life in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. By the time he was 12, Cliff had learned basic photography from his father and could develop, print, and enlarge photographs from negatives. Photography became his consuming passion.

In May 1943, just short of his 18th birthday, Cliff enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve.¹ Basic training at Cornwallis left little time for picture taking and on 11 October, having preferred an immediate sea-going appointment to specialized training and course-work, he joined *Dunver* in Halifax. *Dunver* was named for the city of Verdun, Quebec. The ship's name was derived through the interposition of the two syllables in the word "Verdun." This unusual arrangement was necessitated by the fact there was already a destroyer named *Verdun* serving with the Royal Navy. *Dunver* was the first frigate launched as part of the RCN's mid-war building program aimed at increasing the number and improving the effectiveness of Canada's escort forces. The ship was built in Quebec City by Morton Engineering and Dry Dock and commissioned there in September 1943. Early the following

month the ship arrived in Halifax for the first time. *Dunver* served in the North Atlantic until war's end.

At the end of November 1943, *Dunver* was assigned to Escort Group C.5 (the "barberpole" brigade²) of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force. Very shortly thereafter the ship left for St. John's, Newfoundland and then, in December, for Londonderry, Northern Ireland, serving as part of the escort for convoy HX-268 on the famous "Newfie to Deny" convoy run. *Dunver's* initiation to the North Atlantic in mid-winter was severe and many ships in the convoy were damaged by winter gales. This proved a harbinger of things to come since on its return trip *Dunver* was also hard hit by ocean storms.

In May 1944, the senior officer of C.5, Acting Commander G.H. Stephen, O.B.E., D.S.C., was located in *Dunver*, which became the senior escort responsible for the convoy's security. A typical ocean escort group by early 1944 would consist of two frigates and from four to six corvettes. Thirty-five of the RCN's 60 frigates eventually served as Senior Officer's ships.³ *Dunver* escorted 16 wartime convoys, including HXS-300 in July 1944, the largest of the war with 167 ships. Following a refit, the frigate joined EG 27 in April 1945. The 1445-ton warship, which had a regular complement of 13 officers and 144 men, was paid off in 1946.⁴

Today, its hulk is still visible as a breakwater in Royston, British Columbia.

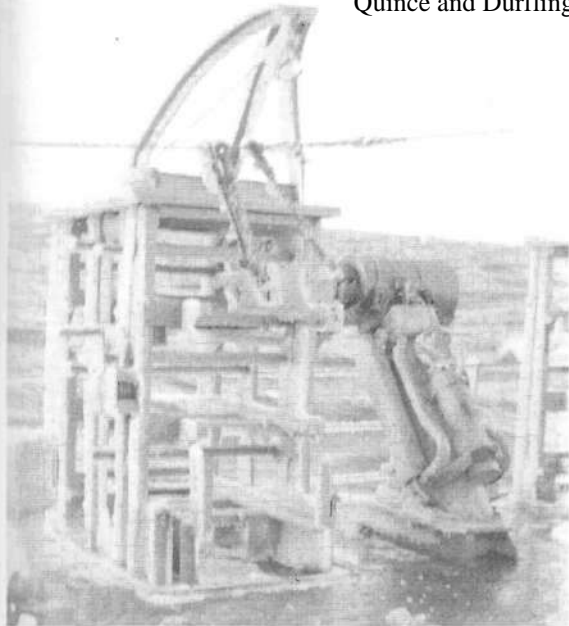
Along the way, Cliff served *Dunver* first as a bo's'n's mate, with piping duties; then as quartermaster and helmsman, which saw Cliff serve in the wheelhouse during action stations; and, finally, as the navigator's yeoman. This latter task, for which he was trained in Halifax and subsequently hand-picked by the navigating officer, involved amending and updating navigational charts.

Following his posting to *Dunver*, Cliff wasted no time indulging his hobby and, with his bellows-type Welta camera, was soon taking as many photographs as time and circumstances would permit. He occasionally developed his film aboard ship. Many of the resulting photographs were for his own use as mementos of his wartime service. However, when ship's officers assigned him a photo duty, such as with the burial at sea pictured in this essay, prints would be handed over to these officers while Cliff maintained his own copies. The impressive snapshots in the Quince collection, which number over 100, are in the process of being accessioned into the Canadian War Museum's photographic archives, which specialize in the personal photos of Canadians at war. They should prove of great interest to researchers of Canada's Second World War naval history.



Photo 3: Quince's photographer's pass, dated February 1945, enabled him to take photos freely about the ship. All his photos were supposed to be reviewed and censored, though he recalls little of this taking place.

Photo 4: Able seaman Clifford Quince, 1943, aged 18. His cap tally designates he is Canadian but omits his ship's name for security reasons.



▲ Photo 5

Photo 5: Depth charge thrower, at right; depth charge stowage rack and loading davit at left. The 300-lb depth charge canister, set to detonate its TNT or amatol charge at a preset depth, rested on a mount which fit inside the barrel of the thrower. When the firing handle was pulled, the depth charge and holder were propelled about 70 yards abeam, each piece falling separately into the sea. A frigate would normally carry a full load of 150 depth charges, and sometimes more. In the last two years of the war, depth charge success rates were exceeded by those of ahead-throwing weapons like Hedgehog or Squid.⁵

Photo 6: "Hedgehog," mounted forward, was a spigot mortar system firing 24 contact-detonated 65-lb bombs some 250 yards. The spigots were angled such that the bombs would fall in an elliptical pattern around a U-boat. Unlike depth charges, there were *no* explosions or resulting asdic interference unless Hedgehog registered a hit. Some crewmen, like Cliff, were lukewarm to the Hedgehog since the ship slowed down during its firing approach to maintain a firm target contact, thereby, it was believed, presenting a tantalizing target for enemy submarines.

Photo 7: Single QF Mk.XIX 4-inch gun, forward. This was the RCN's standard surface weapon of the war, firing a variety of ammunition to a range of eight miles. This photo, taken from the bridge, offers a good view of the gun crew at practice. *Dunver's* single gun forward was replaced by a twin 4-inch mount in late 1944. Note the Carley floats lashed port and starboard. *Dunver* carried nine such life-saving devices.⁶

Photo 8: Twin 20 mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns. These short-range, magazine-fed guns were found on virtually all RCN ships by 1944. This version, four of which were mounted aboard *Dunver* in place of the single mounts originally installed, was equipped with a power-operated 360° mounting. The sailor pictured is Lome Hoffmann whom the crew nicknamed "Fritz," with good-natured irony. His shipmates always assumed Hoffmann spoke German, but when, at war's end, *Quaver's* officers called on him to interpret during a meeting with surrendered German U-boat officers, Hoffmann begged off, claiming he spoke only 'Low German' while these particular U-boat officers spoke 'High German'!



▲ Photo 6



▼ Photo 7



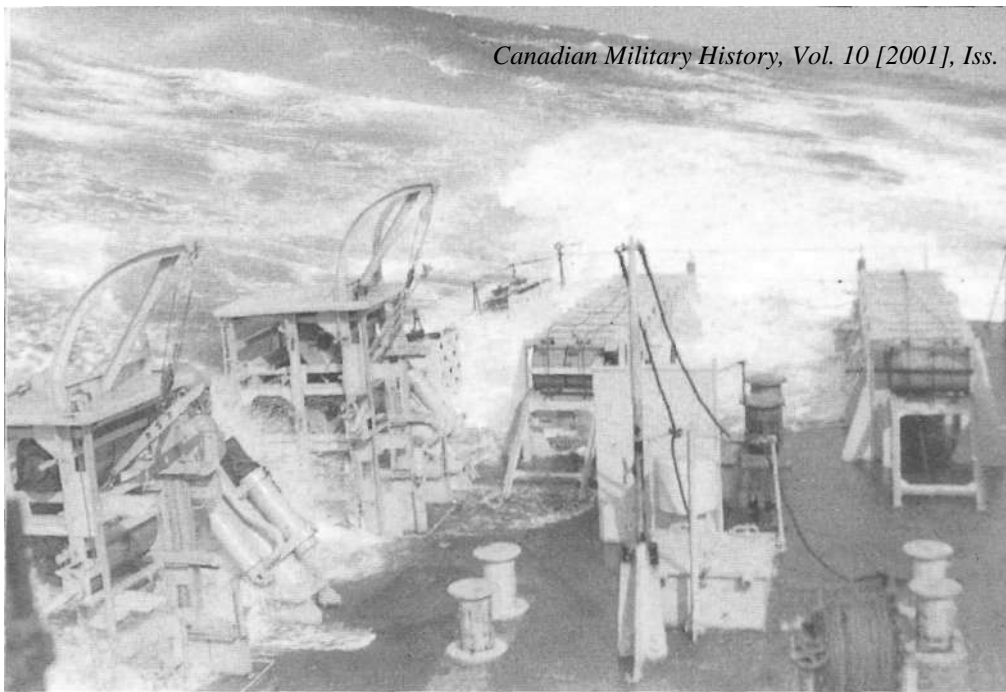


Photo 9: The after deck awash in heavy seas - a typical North Atlantic day with mountains of green water closing in on the ship. Nevertheless, few sailors experienced seasickness beyond their first days at sea. Cliff remembers one *Dunver* crewman, Tom Fisher, from Verdun, Quebec, who was seasick every time the ship left harbour but consistently refused the offer of a shore appointment; he had joined the navy to go to sea. Note the two depth charge rails at the stern and both starboard depth charge throwers with their respective stowage racks beside them.

Photo 10: View down the starboard side during winter conditions. Uneven icing conditions frequently made ship handling, especially steering and staying on course, extremely difficult. Making one's way along a narrow passageway such as this one was a dangerous but routine occupational hazard for the crew. The slanted horizon line shows that the ship was rolling at the moment the photo was snapped.



Photo 11: Icing, view from the bow. Months of winter weather and freezing spray frequently hampered ship's operations. The twin 4-inch guns, barely discernible below the funnel, are completely iced over. If ice build-up made a ship too top-heavy, it ran the risk of capsizing. Ice was always thicker on the side of the ship getting the most spray and, when conditions became dangerous, the captain ordered "all hands on deck" and the crew would chop away at the ice with axes.



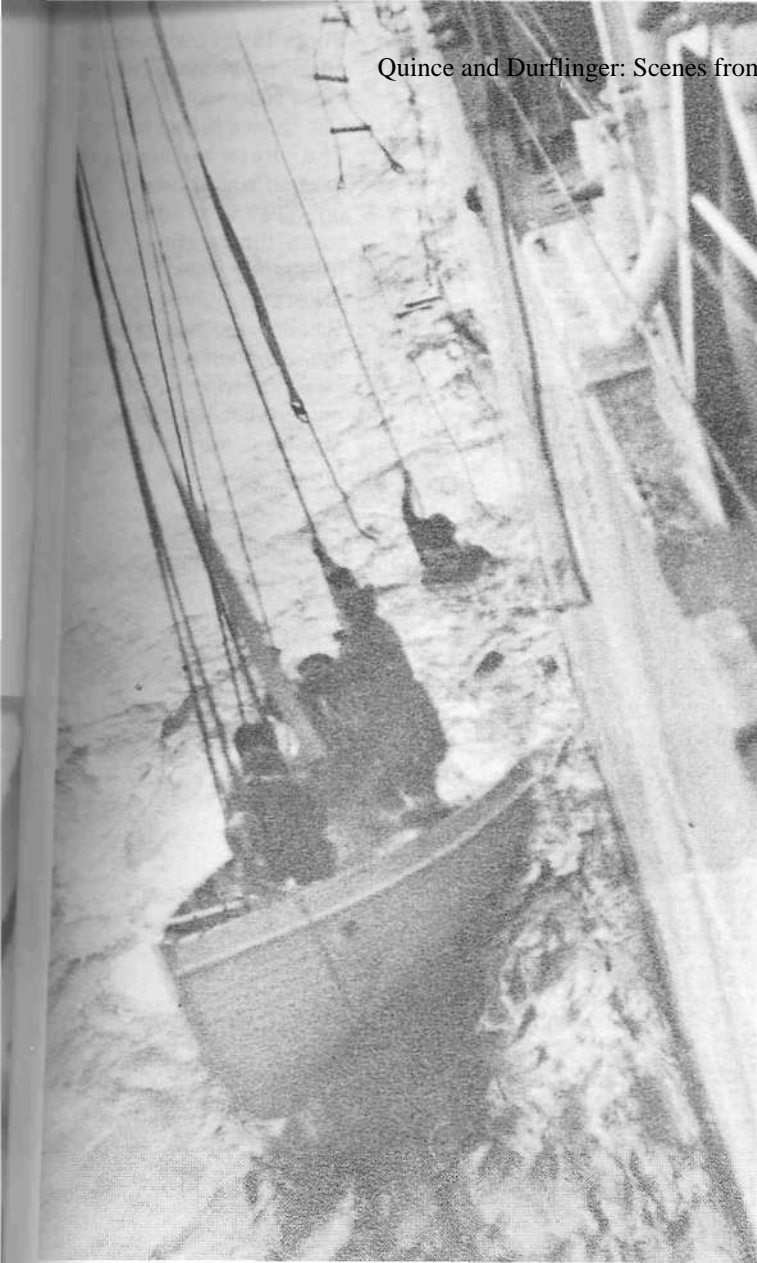


Photo 12: The ship's 27-foot whaler took on more water than expected during this training exercise off Bermuda in March 1945. In lowering the boat from both its gravity davits, the timing had to be just right to avoid the mishap pictured here.



Photo 13: *Dunver*, pennant number K 03, in drydock at Pictou, Nova Scotia, stern view, late 1944. Frigates, originally designated 'Lengthened Twin-screw Corvettes,' were a much-improved design over the corvettes employed in the earlier years of the war. The frigates were larger, faster, more heavily armed, and had much greater endurance. *Dunver's* pennant number is unusually low and was made available by the transfer of HMS *Heliotrope* to the United States in 1942.⁷ While all Canadian frigates were designated with the prefix K, none but *Dunver* used a two-digit pennant number.

Photo 14: A transfer at sea - oil drums being trans-shipped near Bermuda between *Dunver* and the frigate *St. Pierre* (pictured), March 1945. In the latter part of the war, the RCN used facilities at Bermuda for post-refit training and work ups. Needless to say, *Dunver's* crew enjoyed the respite from the North Atlantic.

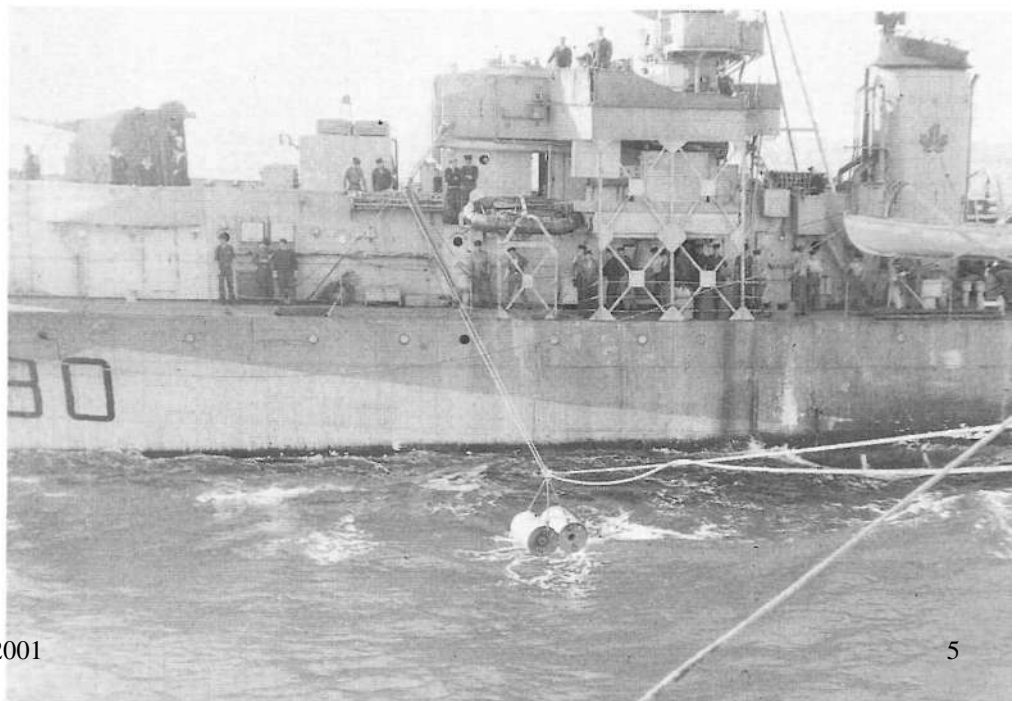




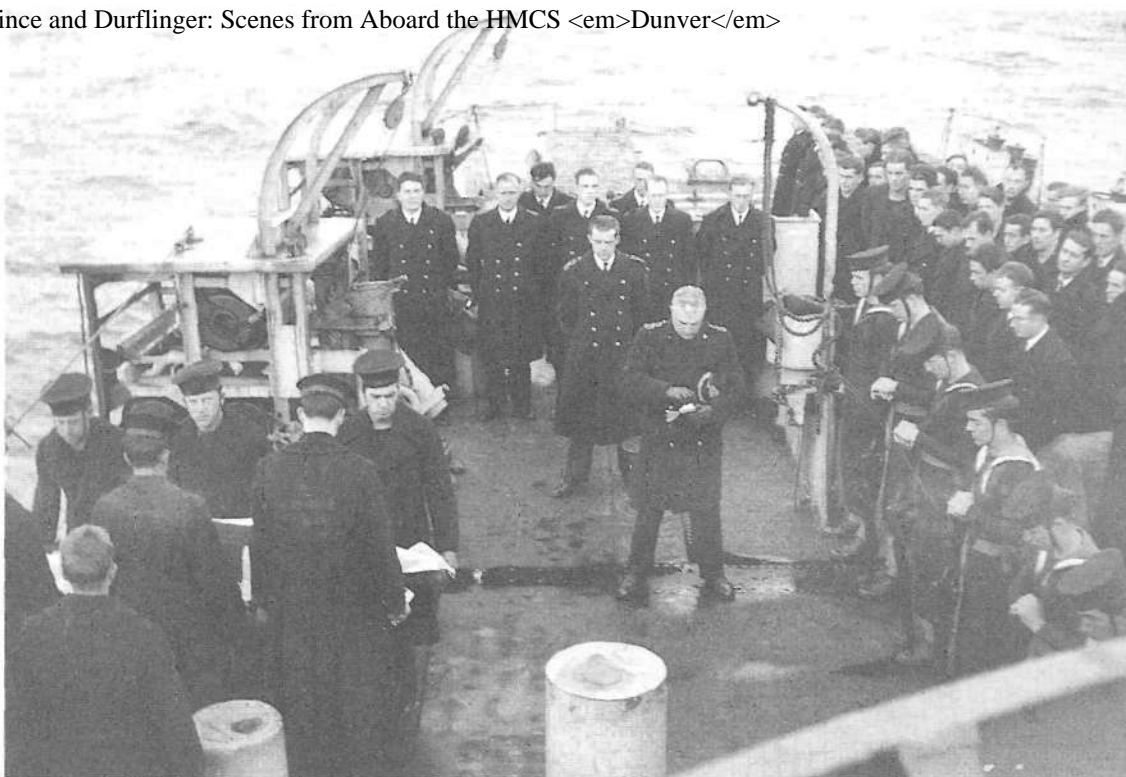
Photo 15: Six *Dunver* matelots posing before the ship's 25-foot motor cutter some time in 1944. Cliff Quince is third from right. The dress uniforms were referred to as 'tiddlies' or 'shore rig'. They fit so tightly on the torso that crewmen would frequently enlist the aid of others in pulling them off! Ribbons and insignia worn by the crewmen denote several years' service. The sailor at extreme left, Ralph Snow, from Montreal, was a boxer well known aboard ship.

Photo 16: Christmas, 1944. This small, sparsely-adorned Christmas tree located in the lower messdeck, along with the cards and presents beneath it, show that life went on in the midst of war. It also evokes the loneliness accompanying separation from loved ones for long periods of time.



Photo 17: The young faces of Canada's naval war in the main lower deck mess. Cliff Quince is first row, bottom left. *Dunver* was a 'happy ship' - the crew got along well and a strong sense of camaraderie and ship's loyalty developed. Cliff remembers a friendly and fun-loving cast of characters, at least six of whom, including the first commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander William Woods, originated from Verdun, *Dunver's* namesake community.





▲ Photo 18

▼ Photo 19



SEAMAN KILLED—Able Seaman Cyril Edward Cole (above), 19-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Cole, 873 Barrington Street, was killed last week during manoeuvres on convoy duty in the Atlantic. A former student of St. Patrick's School, AB. Cole was active in the Sea Cadets and Reserve Army before his enlistment. He was a former employee at Halifax Shipyards, Limited.

Photo 18: Consigning the mortal remains of sailors to the deep is an ancient naval tradition. Ordinary Seaman Cyril (Woody) Cole, from Halifax, was killed in early 1945 in an accident during a depth charge drill. The ship's captain, Lieutenant (N) William Davenport, RCNR, led a religious service. The Union Jack, which is held fast to the rail, covers the remains.⁸ All crewmen not on duty turned out for the burial. Cliff recalls that the crew, unused to being so smartly turned out while at sea, at first groused at being obliged to wear their dress uniforms. But once the service began, they attended the funeral in a mood of solemn self-reflection. "Our tears for a buddy gone would come later and in private."⁹

Photo 19: "...we therefore commit this body to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body, when the sea shall give up her dead and the life of the world to come..." (from the Episcopal prayer book). When the captain uttered the first words of the above prayer, Cole's remains, sown into his hammock and weighted down at the feet, were slid into the ocean next to the depth charge rails where he lost his life. Following the sounding of the Last Post, the honour guard fired three volleys. The ceremony then terminated.¹⁰

Notes

1. Cliff Quince has published a brief account of his life aboard *Dunver*. See "Life Below Decks," in *Up The Gatineau!*, publication of the Historical Society of the Gatineau, Volume 22, 1996, pp.27-32.
2. So-called because of the slanted alternating white and red bars which ringed the upper funnels of ships of that escort group.
3. Peter Elliott, *Allied Escort Ships of World War Two* (London: Macdonald and Janes, 1977), p.358.
4. Ken Macpherson and John Burgess, *The Ship's of Canada's Naval Forces* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 1994), p.46 and Ken Macpherson, *Frigates of the Royal Canadian Navy 1943-1974* (St. Catharines, Ontario, 1989), p.22. See also Elliott, *Allied Escort Ships of World War Two*, p.363.
5. See John Campbell, *Naval Weapons of World War Two* (London: Conway, 1985), pp.88-91.
6. "Fighting Equipment Report," HMCS *Dunver*, April 1, 1944, 81/520/8000 "Dunver file," Directorate of History and Heritage, NDHQ, Ottawa.
7. Macpherson and Burgess. *The Ship's of Canada's Naval Forces*, p.46. See also Elliott, *Allied Escort Ships of World War Two*. p.357.
8. E.C. Russell, *Customs and Traditions of the Canadian Armed Forces* (Deneau and Greenberg; Department of National Defence), 1980, p.70. See also Graeme Arbuckle, *Customs and Traditions of the Canadian Navy* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1984), pp.90-91.
9. Cliff Quince, "Life Below Decks," p.32.
10. Arbuckle, *Customs and Traditions of the Canadian Navy*, pp.90-91.

Clifford Quince retired from Bell Canada in 1982. He lives in Wakefield, Quebec with Joyce, his wife of 48 years. Both are avid photographers of landscapes, individuals, and Canadian folk art, especially unusual and interesting rural mailboxes and weathervanes.

Serge Durflinger, a native of Verdun, is an historian at the Canadian War Museum. He has recently published *Lest We Forget: A History of the Last Post Fund 1909-1999* available at <www.lastpostfund.ca>.