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Minefield

The Mining of HMS *Achates*, 25 July 1941

Ronald Weyman

Port ZX is a remote anchorage on the west coast of Scotland, entered only through a narrow channel from the turbulent Atlantic Ocean. Through this channel at the change of the tide surges a tumultuous sea, carrying all before it.

Once inside, the loch spreads itself out, quiet and spacious, clear amber water sparkling in the sun, set amongst uninhabited purple hills and tors. According to the Admiralty Guide to Navigation in the Hebrides, it is said to be an excellent place for salmon fishing.

Achates' navigating officer, Lieutenant Stobie, RN, had been drafted to become number one in a new ship, and our commanding officer had asked me to assume Stobie's duties. I respectfully reminded the Captain that as much as I appreciated his offer, I had joined the ship as an anti-submarine officer, a specialist in submarine detection and in the sinking of same, and any practical knowledge I had of navigation had initially been gained in the nine months I had served in a converted fishing trawler, working out of the Faroe Islands, where we had been sinking floating mines and the like. The Captain reminded me that in fact I had now been in *Achates* for some months as a watch-keeping officer, during which time, under his observation, I had become reasonably adept at both coast-wise and deep sea navigation, and the use of the chronometer, chart and sextant in determining the ship's position. Also, as Stobie's assistant I had been looking after the navigation charts, and keeping them up to date, following the constant "Notices to Mariners," which spelled out the toll of wrecks and sunken vessels that accumulated around the shores and sea-lanes of beleaguered Britain, as well as the extensive mine-fields which surrounded and protected her from enemy invasion.

Jocynen further assured me that he would, of course, continue to take his own celestial sights to check with mine, and so it was with considerable pleasure that I, a Temporary Acting Sub-lieutenant Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve [RCNVR] became the navigating officer of the Royal Navy fleet destroyer HMS *Achates*.

In Scapa the previous day, a "most secret" signal had instructed us to report to Port ZX, and sunset had found us surging in through the turbulence of the narrow channel, and emerging in the placid, extensive, land-locked waters of the anchorage. In the setting sun, long dark shadows were being cast across the surface of the water, riffled by a light and intermittent land breeze, and it was only after clearing the headland that one became aware of a number of HM warships lying at anchor, barely discernable in their camouflage against the darkening shoreline.

With first morning light, one could determine what the ships were. Two destroyers, V's and W's, much the same vintage as *Achates*, a battlecruiser - the *Devonshire*, I think she was and anchored slightly apart from them, a great ungainly vessel, whose bulky shape contrasted oddly with the sleek lines of the Naval vessels. This last, lying low in the water appeared sinister to me, a box of a vessel with curious doors in the stern, she sat motionless and dark in the water, in the morning sun, with an air of threat in her very presence.

A bosun's pipe shrilled from the deck of the cruiser, and in a moment the angular figure of Jocynen could be seen descending her companionway and stepping into a waiting boat, to be ferried rapidly alongside *Achates*, where in turn he was piped aboard by our ship's chief petty officer, smartly turned out despite the early hour. Our Captain had been getting the Admiral's sailing instructions.

As Officer of the Day, it was my responsibility to stand by the gangway and salute as he came aboard.

"Wey," he said, returning my salute, "I'll see you in the chart-room."

"Sir," I responded.

The ship's first lieutenant was already in the chart-room when we entered.

"Number One," said Jocylen.

"Sir."

"We are going to Murmansk." Jocylen pulled the sailing orders out of his pocket. "Would you pipe all hands, Number One, and stand by to weigh anchor."

"Aye, aye, sir."

In a moment the bosun's pipe was shrilling throughout the ship. Jocylen already had the pertinent navigation charts out of their drawers, and onto the chart table. The Engineer officer, a bright-eyed Welshman poked his head in.

"Chief," said Jocylen. "I want steam for twenty-five knots."

"Aye, aye, sir." The Chief vanished.

"Are the West coast of Iceland minefields up to date on the chart, Wey?"

"I checked them with the latest corrections we got in Scapa sir," I replied. "There is a channel five miles in width between the minefield and the coast of Iceland at its nearest point. Here, off Seidsfjordur." I pointed.

Jocylen took a pair of dividers and checked the distance.

"We are to go through there, between the minefield and the mainland during the dark hours, keeping as far as possible offshore to avoid detection," he said.

The Chief had steam on all boilers and presently we were moving at a great rate towards the narrow harbour entrance, the vessel trembling in seeming eagerness to get to the open

sea. Half a mile astern of us the hulking form of the mystery ship was getting under way. Behind her, one could see the cruiser and the other two destroyers. The first lieutenant was taking the ship out. I was on the corner of the bridge.

"I say, Number One, what's all the hurry?"

"Magnetic mines," he replied.

"What?"

"Just in case Jerry had planted magnetic mines in the channel overnight. The thing to do is to send us through at a rapid rate of knots to actuate such mines and cause them to explode. It clears the channel for the important blokes."

"Oh," I said.

I trained my binoculars astern, where the dark, forbidding vessel was slowly moving into our wake.

"That's an important bloke, then," I said.

"That is one of His Majesty's fleet minelayers."

I looked at her impressive bulk, low in the water.

"Loaded with mines?"

"Right."

Below us on the deck abaft the bridge, hands were cheerfully at work in the brisk morning air cleaning ship, checking equipment, fulfilling each his particular task. It was a familiar enough scene, sharpened perhaps by the exhilaration of our fast passage through the water. Someone from the ship's galley emerged with a pail of slops, the content of which he threw over the side to the gratification of raucous seagulls.

Then I was aware of a sudden muffled explosion, as of a small calibre gun being fired. I turned, and to my amazement I saw that a starboard side depth charge thrower had gone off and the charge itself was arcing through the air, to fall with barely a splash into the surge thrown up by our speeding vessel.

The first lieutenant had his head stuck in the chart table, and had noticed nothing. The Captain

emerged from his sea-cabin, adjacent to the bridge. He peered astern. A leading seaman, a torpedo rating, pounded up the ladder. He arrived and saluted, white of face, breathless.

"Beg to report, captain sir. Depth charge fired, sir. By mistake. Starboard side."

"Was it set to safe. leading seaman Harrison?"

"I 'ope so, sir."

The captain shifted his gaze astern for a moment, towards the oncoming minelayer.

"Then we will see what we will see, won't we," he observed. "You had better get back there, leading seaman."

"Aye aye, sir." the man saluted and went.

The duty signalman, on the bridge, alert to the situation, spoke to the Captain.

"Should I flash up the minelayer, sir?"

"No Bunts, thank you. It would cause unnecessary agitation." The captain's voice was quiet.

The fact was that in that narrow channel any avoiding action was impossible. The depth charge would either blow or it would not. In the former case, the timing was such that it would likely detonate under the on-coming minelayer, and trigger a devastating explosion that would rival that which wrought such havoc in Halifax in the First World War, perhaps damaging the cruiser and ourselves in the process.

If it did not blow, the fleet unit would stream out happily, unknowingly, through the channel to seek the open sea, flags flying, ship's companies and their commanding officers sitting down to breakfasts of spam and sausages.

The minutes passed, and we began to breathe again. The depth charge did not blow. Neither did we discover enemy magnetic mines in the channel, and presently we passed safely into the open sea.

Once free of the land, we eased back to about 12 knots, and the course was altered for Iceland, the destroyers taking station ahead and abeam



Lieutenant-Commander Ronald C. Weyman

of the minelayer and the cruiser. *Achates* was stationed on the starboard side.

It was midnight of the second day. I was bent over the chart table, making entries in the log and marking our estimated position on the chart, before turning over the watch, going below and getting my head down.

I might interject here that in my experience, when one had the job of escorting a senior member of the fleet, say a cruiser or a battleship, shortly after noon each day, each of the escorting destroyers would hoist signal flags to the yardarm, indicating the calculated noon position. Then, a few minutes later, the Admiral would fly his decision of where precisely we were. Sometimes these estimated positions differed slightly, but one accepted the Admiral's position, and marked it on the chart, along with one's own calculation.



HMS Achates was an "A" Class destroyer, very similar to HMS Acheron, pictured here. Achates was launched in October 1939. Her armament differed slightly from the ship pictured above. It included 2 x 4.7" guns, 2 pom-pom 2-pounders, 4 x 20 mm Oerlikons, 4 torpedo tubes, a hedgehog (in place of the forward gun), and depth charge throwers (in place of the rear gun). Following the mining incident described in this article, Achates was re-commissioned in April 1942 and escorted convoys to Murmansk and Archangel and supported the North African landings in November 1942. Achates was sunk on 31 December 1942 while defending an arctic convoy from attacks by the German heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper.

So, in fact, in this case, there were two parallel courses marked on the chart, differing very slightly one from the other.

The Captain appeared beside me, scratching his straggly beard. He peered over my shoulder at the chart.

"What do you think, Wey?" he said.

"According to the Admiral's calculations at noon, sir, he says we are here," I replied, indicating a pencilled position on the chart, near the east coast of Iceland. "Present course and speed is calculated to bring us close to the minefield at 0300. We are to skirt the minefield here," I shifted the pencil to a point along our projected course.

The Old Man took up a pair of dividers in practiced fingers, and measured the distance.

"I gather the Admiral has instructions to keep off shore as far as possible to avoid detection." I ventured. "The further off shore, the closer to the minefield."

Joclyen was unamused.

"What about our own calculations?"

"Noon sight put us here, sir," I indicated a spot marked on the chart which differed slightly in position from that of the Admiral's. "Maintaining course and speed, we should be at this point now," my finger moved. "And projecting

to three a.m. we should just be entering the corner of the minefield."

Joclyen had fished out a much-used pipe, which he stuffed with tobacco. He continued to look at the chart, struck a match and blew a cloud of smoke.

"In that case," he said. "one can only trust the Admiral's navigator is correct." He bent again over the chart. After a moment, I came to attention.

"Goodnight, sir," I said, and left him.

I descended from the bridge, and made my way in the dark through the familiar orderly clutter of the upper deck.

The steel door creaked under my hand. I closed it and switched on the light. My little cabin was a haven in which the ever-present roar of the sea and the buffeting of the wind were reduced to a murmur. "on the built-in chest of drawers were familiar photographs of family and sweetheart, a book rack with some Conrad, Dickens, poems of Rupert Brooke, and a book about Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter. Under the bunk were drawers, in which I kept clothes and gramophone records.

Over the head of my bunk was a bracket that had been welded onto the steel bulk-head. It held a radio-gramophone I had bought in London. A sophisticated machine, it could be adapted to AC or DC. The radio channels ranged from short

wave to VHF. I switched it on and tuned in a station in Budapest playing Hungarian gypsy music, romantic violins and the throbbing lilt of the cimbalom, that horizontal harp-like stringed instrument played dextrously with wooden hammers.

I brushed my teeth, climbed into my bunk, switched off the light and the radio, and to the gentle movement of the sea and the subdued throb of the engines, I fell asleep.

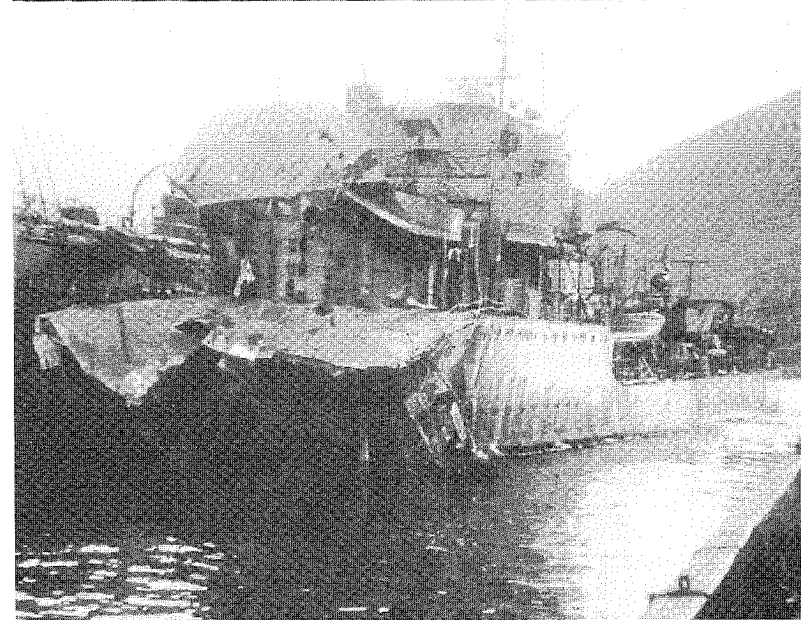
It seemed moments later there was a vast explosion. I was flung out of my bunk, moving so swiftly that my beautiful, radio-gramophone, dislodged by the impact, fell on my bunk where a second before, my head had rested.

I was already in my clothes, lacking only sea-boots. Around my chest, deflated, was the inseparable Mae West. I thrust my feet into the boots, pulled on my cap, and made for the door. The ship was curiously quiet. The engines had stopped, the deck under my feet was slanting in a peculiar manner. The heavy latch on the door was stiff, and in the dark I wrestled with it.. It gave under my effort, and I burst out only to recoil with shock. Virtually everything forward of my cabin - the entire forecastle - had disappeared. Before me there was empty vertiginous space. Below me, the sea humped, dark and oil-slicked. From a ripped and ragged piece of shattered bulkhead fluttered the remnants of a hammock, torn and bloody. There was an acrid smell of burnt cordite in the air. Strangely, I was alone.

I turned and in the darkness picked my way to the wheelhouse, the deck slanting under my feet. Cole Hamilton, who had taken over from me earlier, as officer of the watch, was struggling with the ship's wheel. At his feet lay the helmsman, unconscious, bleeding from the mouth.

"See the Captain on the Bridge," said Cole-Hamilton.

I went up top. The Captain was speaking with quiet authority into the engine-room voice-pipe. The crisp voice of our Welsh engineer officer came back reassuringly. I glanced around the dark horizon. It was empty. I caught the eye of the first lieutenant.



Top: Survivors gather on the afterdeck of *Achates* after hitting the mine.

Above: The severe damage suffered by *HMS Achates* is obvious in this photo taken after the ship returned to port.

"They've all buggered off," he said. "You all right?"

"Yes, thanks, Number One. You?"

"Alright."

The Chief Engineer appeared. He was covered with oil, wiping his hands on a piece of cotton waste. "I can give you two knots, Captain. Going astern."

"Very good, Chief," said Jocylen.

"That way I can handle damage control, which is a bit dicey," said the Chief. He rang down to the engine room.

Jocelyn had turned to the chart table. "Number One. We'll head for Seydisfiord. Thank God for a calm sea." He straightened up, "and let me know the casualties, will you?"

"The medical officer's onto it, sir."

"Very good." He turned to me. "We must reduce top-weight, Wey. Would you get a party onto B gundeck and jettison everything you can."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Chief had gone back to his engine room, and presently the screws began to thump again under the ship's stern. The broken vessel shuddered throughout her reduced length, and presently began to move going slowly astern, meeting the cold, northern Atlantic waters.

Everything forward of "B" gun-deck was gone. The entire fo'c'sle, "A" gun, mess decks, accommodation for half the ship's company who were asleep at the time of the explosion. All gone. On "B" gun-deck itself, the explosion had caused a shambles. "A" steel gun-shield remained, but it was bent up at a ninety degree angle. Cables and live shells were littered on the tilting wet surface of the deck, along with a greasy substance which made footing precarious.

Some of the ready-use ammunition for the 4.7 had been damaged by the explosion, and now, wet with rain, it was exuding cordite, sending up nauseous fumes.

In that dim growing light of dawn, I collected half a dozen of a work crew - a petty officer, a steward still in his white mess jacket, and, together with hacksaws and wrenches and bare hands, we did our best to lighten the ship, flinging overboard the bubbling canisters of explosive, lethal 4.7 ammunition, unshackling broken wires and cables, dispensing with whatever we could move.

"Wot 'appened, sir?"

"Minefield."

"Fo'c'sle's gone."

"Yes."

"The off-duty watch. Gone. The lot."

"Yes."

"That's more than 'alf the ship's company sir."

"Yes. Could you give a hand over here."

"Right, sir."

Time passed, and we did what we could to lighten ship. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when I made my way back to the quarterdeck, from where the ship was now being navigated. A steward brought some bully beef sandwiches and "kai" that thick, sweet, hot chocolate, you could stand a spoon up in. Gratefully I started to scoff the food.

"Excuse me, sir," said the steward. "Yes?"

"Some of us 'ave 'eard your playing an accordion at times."

"Yes, a bit."

"Well, we 'ad one in the lower deck, but it got blown up."

"Oh, did it."

"And we thought...perhaps...."

"Oh my Lord! Of course! Hold on a minute."

I thrust my kai and sandwich at him to hold, and went quickly to my cabin. It was strangely remote and peaceful in there, other than the slant to the deck. as if nothing unusual at all had occurred. I dug into my locker and pulled out the little accordion I had acquired in London. Not that I could play it. Quickly I carried it back to the quarter deck. The steward handed over his tray to another grinning fellow and I put the instrument into his hands, collecting my kai and the corned beef sandwich in return.

"Here, it's yours," I said.

"Play it," said Number One.

The steward opened the instrument, and ran his fingers nimbly over the keys.

"It's not too bad of an instrument," he said.

"Sounds great."

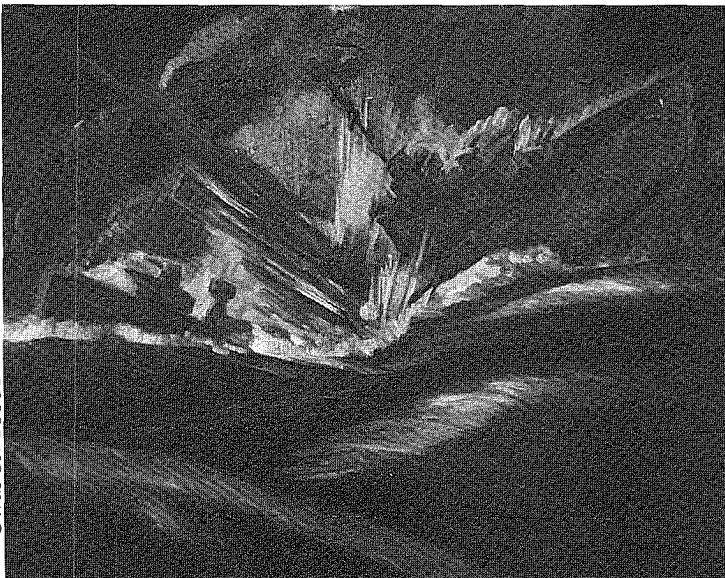
"Over the Sea to Skye," I said, attacking my sandwich.

The steward stood on the dirty quarterdeck of that poor, battered hulk, and played the little accordion. The sea remained calm, and undetected by the enemy, in due course we made our way to Seydisfiord and requested assistance. I packed up my gear. The Captain gave me a destroyer watch-keeping certificate, commending me for future appointments. I shook hands all round and left the battered *Achates*, getting

transport to Reykavik, where I picked up passage in a Canadian vessel bound for Halifax. I was on survivor's leave.

I learned later that the damaged *Achates* was towed back to Scotland, re-fitted with a new front end, and had again joined a convoy bound for Murmansk. This time they were attacked by a German cruiser, the *Hipper* and *Achates* laid a smoke-screen between her and the convoy. For her efforts, *Achates* was sunk by gunfire from the *Hipper*, with great loss of life.

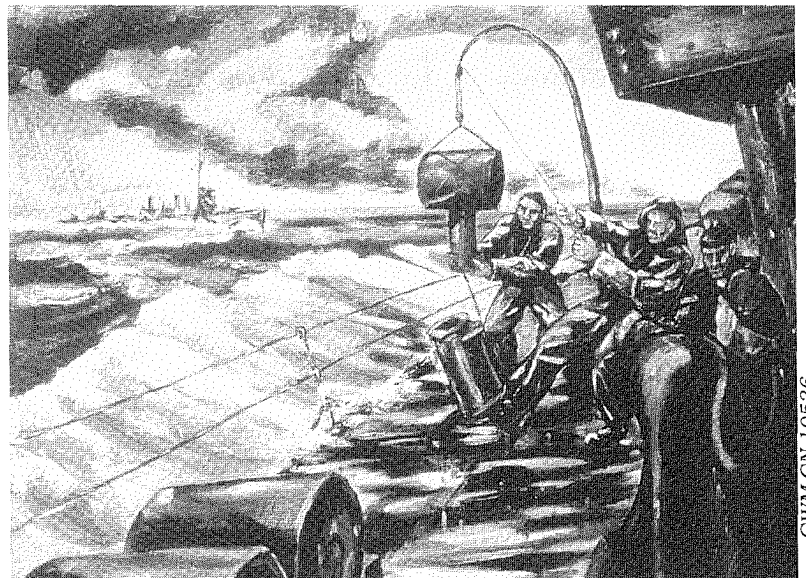
Sub-lieutenant Paul McLaughlin RCNVR with whom I had gone to HMS *King Alfred*, was a gunnery officer aboard the British cruiser *Sheffield* in that convoy. He saw *Achates* sunk, and years later he told me that he thought I was still in that unfortunate vessel.



HMCS Ottawa Torpedoed and Sunk by R.C. Weyman

Ron Weyman joined the Royal Canadian Navy in the early days of World War II as a sub-lieutenant, RCNVR, and was sent to England on loan to the Royal Navy. He trained as an asdic specialist, then served out of Scapa Flow aboard HMT *Preston North End*. Transferred to the destroyer HMS *Achates*, he witnessed the sinking of the battleship *Hood* and picked up some of the few survivors. Following the mining of *Achates*, Weyman joined HMCS *St. Croix* on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic, enduring some of the worst U-Boat engagements of the war.

On D-Day, Weyman took a "floating radar palace" into Omaha Beach directing Allied aircraft over the



Starboard Throwers by R.C. Weyman

beachhead. Later he captained an LST in the Far East.

During the war, Weyman captured some of his experiences on canvas, and a number of these paintings (see above) now reside in the War Art Collection of the Canadian War Museum. His painting "HMCS *St. Croix* and U-Boat in the North Atlantic" was used on the cover of the Summer 1999 issue of *Canadian Military History*.

Following the war, Weyman directed film and TV, working for the National Film Board and the CBC. His memoir, *In Love and War*, was published by Simon and Pierre Publishing Company in 1995.