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# “Pusser grub? My God but it was awful!”<sup>1</sup>

## Feeding the Fleet During the Second World War

SANDY GOW

*Abstract: When Canada declared war on Germany in September 1939 the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR), and Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (RCNR) consisted of perhaps 3,000 officers and men. The RCN was manning six destroyers and seven smaller craft out of Halifax and Esquimalt. While the men of the RCNR had seagoing experience through the merchant navy and the fishing fleets, only a limited number of men from the RCNVR had managed to spend any time in RCN vessels. No reservist from either category that had any significant prewar training or experience in food supply or preparation for large groups could be located for an interview. However, former navy cooks who joined just before and during the course of the war have been interviewed by this author or by other researchers, as have seamen who served with these men and consumed the meals they prepared at sea. This study will examine the validity of the statement quoted in the title. It will look at the victualling and cook trades, the drafts (postings) these men had between 1939 and 1945, the type of trade training they received, the foods they were permitted to order and were given to prepare, the conditions under which they worked in different classes of ships, how the seamen responded to their meals, and the role they played in feeding the men as well as keeping up morale and playing their part in fighting the ship.*

WERE TOM MACINTYRE’S remarks a fair assessment of the quality of the rations supplied to Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) ships and the food served up to the men at sea during the Second

World War? The answers to these questions are best determined through an examination of the wartime memories of a wide range of informants. What becomes clear is that both the health and morale of the men fell in part on the shoulders of the seamen who supplied the food and prepared it. This study will examine the training of the victuallers (pronounced “vittlers”) and cooks; the food and drink they were permitted to requisition and prepare, the conditions under which they worked, how the men onboard responded to their efforts, and whether or not the navy viewed their naval service worthy of official praise. It will argue that not all seamen shared Tom MacIntyre’s views, including his brother, Cook George MacIntyre.

By 1945 the RCN had expanded to almost 400 vessels of all types and come to include 90,000 officers and men, many of whom would spend some time at sea in a warship.<sup>2</sup> Across Canada, shore establishments were expanded and new ones built. All required cooks to feed seamen, but it was at sea where the need for their trade was the most desperate. Each ship required a minimum of one cook, and as their ships’ crews expanded in the face of new technologies, more were called for but not always provided. In the examination vessels, fairmiles, minesweepers, corvettes, and frigates the officers and men shared the same menu and cooks, but in the destroyers, cruisers, and later several escort aircraft carriers there would be two types of cooks, one for officers and one for ratings (non-commissioned members).

Victuallers were the seamen whose task it was to supply the ship’s company and the cooks with provisions. Their trade was somewhat misnamed because in addition to supplying food for the galley, they were also often held responsible for acquiring various other stores for the ship. By the time the war ended they would be renamed supply assistants, and some would be limited to food items while others would handle all types of naval stores. Until late 1942 or early

<sup>1</sup> “Pusher” is anything government or navy issue, as well as anything official or strict and regulation; Interview with Tom MacIntyre. All interviews are in the personal possession of the author of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This number excludes women enrolled in the Womens’ Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS or “Wrens”); by 31 August 1945, 6,738 women had enlisted in the WRCNS. W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty, and Michael Whitby with Robert H. Caldwell, William Johnston, and William G.P. Rawling, *A Blue Water Navy. The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, Vol. II, Part 2* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2007), 606.

1943 their ranks were: probationary victualling assistant (ordinary seaman), victualling assistant (able seaman), leading victualler, petty officer (PO) victualler, and chief petty officer victualler, or more simply chief victualler. Very small vessels such as coastal patrol fairmiles and harbour examination vessels did not have a victualler; the cook submitted a menu to a supply depot and it would be approved or not depending upon whether it met certain provisions for feeding a ship's company.

The prewar structure of the cook trade persisted after the war and into the late 1940s. It was: assistant cook (ordinary seaman), ship's/officers' cook (able seaman), leading cook, petty officer (PO) cook and chief petty officer cook.<sup>3</sup> Officers' ('O') cooks were, explained retired Chief Cook George MacIntyre, the cooks that the officers onboard or ashore considered "really good" and were told after joining that they would become 'O' cooks. "They thought they were pretty special, but they weren't really. They just made things look a bit fancier." It was "fuss and presentation," he said. Further, officers also bought extra food for their wardroom (mess) and the officers' cooks prepared it for them. Being an 'O' cook, he maintained, was "a jammy go," or easy assignment.<sup>4</sup>

Ship's ('S') cooks cooked for the ratings in the ship's company. In *Ottawa (2nd)*, a River-class destroyer, there was one 'O' cook and two 'S' cooks for a crew numbering over 180 officers and ratings. The smaller warships, and the examination vessels that inspected incoming and outgoing freighter traffic at harbours in Canada, were initially entitled to one 'S' cook, often with the most basic training. Bob Small served in the corvette *Dunvegan* where there was only one cook, but when he was drafted to the frigate *Stormont* he found one 'S' cook and one assistant cook. *Chicoutimi*, another corvette, also had only one cook for sixty-five men, and he "didn't have the time, space or facilities to make food dishes like my mother did." *Oakville*, also a corvette, could boast a leading cook and a cook for a crew of seventy-nine officers and men.<sup>5</sup> Assistant Cook Earl Chadwick joined the corvette *Bowmanville* and discovered that he was working

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Bob Small; Edward O'Connor, *The Corvette Years: The Lower Deck Story* (Vancouver: Cordillera, 1995), 14; Sean E. Livingston, *Oakville's Flower: The History of HMCS Oakville* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014), 78.

with a cook and another assistant cook. Minesweepers were initially meant to carry only one cook, but Fred Shobbrook was one of two for a crew of forty to fifty seamen sailing out of Esquimalt on west coast patrols in the diesel minesweeper *Kelowna*. *Wasaga*, another minesweeper, was different again. Somehow the commanding officer (CO) managed to embark three cooks for a crew of almost seventy officers and men.<sup>6</sup> But no exceptions were made for examination vessels. Fred Shobbrook of *Mont Joli* in Halifax Harbour was the only cook. *Madawaska*, working out of Quebec City, embarked one cook as well for its crew of under ten officers and men. Unfortunately, some five or six cooks came and went between spring and November 1941. Sometimes the *Madawaska* had none because the cooks were drafted to sea as new ships were commissioned. Therefore, Wireless Telegraphist (WT) Allan Riley acted as cook and shared “even I tried my hand at the culinary art. I tried pie-making, but my pastry was terrible. I attempted a special stew using a *Toronto Star* recipe. It was also a disaster.”<sup>7</sup>

As the navy expanded, the hunt for cooks was on. George MacIntyre, who joined the permanent force RCN hoping to be a stoker in the boiler room before the war, explained how cooks were selected: “The navy had ships coming out and it needed Cooks, so if you wanted to join you had to take what they [RCN] were offering. Often that was a job as a Cook.”<sup>8</sup> From the start MacIntyre was a marked man; he had worked as an assistant to his father, a lumber camp cook on Miramichi River in New Brunswick. He had also worked as a railway cook for the Canadian National Railways (CNR), taking the run back and forth between Halifax and Moncton.<sup>9</sup> Walter Swereyda had been a baker at McGavin’s Bread in Edmonton when he joined. He believed that he was correctly placed as a cook because the trade matched his interests and abilities. He was promoted rapidly between November 1943 and discharged in early 1946, leaving the RCN as an acting/(A) PO cook. Another cook from Vancouver, Fred Shobbrook, had also been a baker.<sup>10</sup> Evidence of a proximity to food preparation of any kind meant that a man was predestined to become a cook.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Fred Shobbrook and Tom Scade.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Riley, *A Sparker’s War*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Privately published, 2005), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with George MacIntyre and Tom MacIntyre.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Walter Swereyda and Fred Shobbrook.

But most men designated for the cook trade did not have experience in baking or food preparation and until later in the war they did not receive proper training.

When a man was designated a cook, he was immediately introduced to “BR5,” the *Manual of Naval Cookery*, one of many *Books of Reference (BRs)* published by the Royal Navy (RN) and RCN. It was published by the Admiralty in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1936. The Canadian version, published with permission in 1937, was marked “NOT FOR SALE TO THE PUBLIC.” This was the major difference between the books, which might lead the reader to conclude that food preparation in the RCN was a military secret. It was a convenient size for the back pocket of a cook’s trousers. This tan coloured little book was meant to be a cook’s version of sacred scriptures. It is divided into eight chapters: general instructions, cooking in small quantities, cooking for a general mess, spices, condiments and seasonings, invalid cooking (for sick persons), and field cooking for armed landing parties which includes instructions on how to dig trenches and build ovens ashore.

The miscellaneous chapter is dedicated to preparing a cook to deal with tinned goods and “ship made articles” for 100 men, such as “Pork Brawn [head cheese].” Something of a British delicacy, brawn was a jellied preparation of the chopped meat from a boiled pig’s head. A cook required pigs’ heads and the cooking instructions started with cleaning the head and went on to a revolting conclusion. When questioned on the subject of brawn, no Second World War seaman would confess to having eaten it. The making of sausage and sausage seasoning is explained in this chapter, as is how to make a salad, pickle meat, which meats were available to the RN, and a series of “miscellaneous hints.” These items are fascinating and include how to deal with the danger of common flies, how to make a hanging fly trap, how to clarify fat, the manufacture of cleaning soaps afloat and ashore, polishing things up, testing eggs, and preserving cheese from going mouldy. All in all, a handy set of procedures are laid out here. Chapter eight is an extensive discussion of bread making. Six appendices involve promotion and examination for cooks in the RN, both ‘O’ and ‘S,’ and certification if going on later to the British merchant navy to take up a position cooking on a merchant vessel.

The recipes are based on feeding 100 men at one sitting, and this indicates that because each prewar RN destroyer would embark about 110 men, BR5 was meant to assist to cater to ships of that

class. In the RCN of 1939–1945, a largely corvette and minesweeper navy often with a recently-drafted and untrained cook in the galley, *BR5* was perhaps of limited value. When being evaluated for promotion, especially prior to instituting proper RCN cook training, a cook would be expected to demonstrate a sound knowledge of this manual. However, when Walter Swereyda, started his training ashore in H.M.C.S. *Naden* at Esquimalt in January 1944, he was given *BR5* and immediately sent to cook in the galley of the POS' barrack block where "Several instructors told you how they did things. You learnt from other cooks." Did he feel confident when he went to sea? "Not really; you had your cook book [*BR5*] and things fell in place."<sup>11</sup>

When asked what training RCN cooks had received before the war, George MacIntyre responded "Not much training at all. The navy got some good, experienced cooks from fishing boats, lumber and mining camps, restaurants that didn't pay much during the Depression, and even the railways. I met men from these places at sea and ashore." He also noted that, after a time, some of these men would become the 'O' cooks.<sup>12</sup> For him it was purely "on the job training" because of his previous experience. It was 1938, he had just finished his training as a boy seaman, and he was told he was about to become a cook. "I was thrown in at the deep end. ... McNab's Island [Halifax Harbour] with eighty-five [RCNVR] Reserves. They [RCN] gave you six aprons, two boiler suits [coveralls], three chef's hats and said "You are the chief cook, now start."<sup>13</sup> He was not a chief cook, of course, but he was in charge of feeding these men and he did not feel competent that, as an assistant cook, he could do the job.<sup>14</sup>

Things improved slightly by 1940 when Fred Shobbrook arrived in the *Naden* to commence training at the cooking school that would later train Walter Swereyda. He was destined to spend one month there, where he was trained in "a little galley" on the base. His class was composed of six men and he was to be a ship's cook. For a month he was up early, helped cook breakfast for about 400 new entry trainees (NETS) undergoing basic training, cleaned up the galley, and then went to the cooking school from 8 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. At noon he helped the *Naden* cooks with lunch and again

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Walter Swereyda.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with Tom and George MacIntyre.

with supper. After cleanup he was able to return to his mess in the barracks by 8 p.m. “One month was all we got. Already working cooks might not get any training at all, having been sent directly to a ship.” His final examination involved cooking a meal for six officers. “If they didn’t get heartburn you’d passed.” They did not, and he was sent to his first draft.<sup>15</sup> Charlie Appleby, who had been in the restaurant business in Winnipeg in the 1930s, attended the same school in 1941. He found the food handling and waste upsetting, and tried to register his complaints to Ottawa. His request was turned down and he earned the name “Standeasy [coffee break] Appleby.” Saturday inspections in the school, especially the treatment of the coal-burning stoves when the inspecting officer used his white gloves to pick up any soot inside the fire box, did not please him either. “They were old RCN men in charge and they were what spoiled the service.”<sup>16</sup>

The official naval historian of the immediate post-war era, Gilbert N. Tucker, says that formal training for all members of the accountant (supply) branch, which included cooks as well as writers and stores rates, began in Halifax in January 1941 “under very unsuitable conditions in the basement of a church in Halifax.” He suggests part of the training for these ratings was moved to the *Naden* in the fall of 1942.<sup>17</sup> However, given the evidence displayed in Fred Shobbrook’s official *Certificate of Service*, cook training was already taking place there. Eric Jensen did his NET in H.M.C.S. *Hunter* at Windsor and was then sent to the Halifax cooking school. His evaluation of his training was positive. “We had excellent instructors. They were chefs from Montreal, with many long years of experience. They were wonderful.”<sup>18</sup> Earl Chadwick—who was just sixteen years old when he joined the navy in early 1944 after forging his mother’s signature on his enlistment application—was sent to Toronto’s Central Technical Training School. Civilian students were taught from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and from 4 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. the three armed forces taught

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>16</sup> Mac Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1994), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada—Its Official History, Vol. II, Activities on Shore during the Second World War* (Ottawa: The King’s Printer, 1952) 311; This church may have been St. Mark’s Anglican.

<sup>18</sup> Historica-Dominion Institute, *We Were Freedom: Canadian Stories of the Second World War* (Toronto: Ken Porter Books, 2010), 86.



their own personnel. Chadwick received instruction in a large kitchen area designated for domestic science and then sent to Halifax to await a sea draft. He was put to work in the galley at the manning depot, H.M.C.S. *Peregrine*, also known as “Pretty Grim,” where most of the cooks were Wrens. “It was the Wren cooks who really polished us off.” he pointed out.<sup>19</sup>

To return to Tucker, he maintains that for members of the account branch the “greatest efficiency” in training seamen was only reached after all operations in Halifax and Esquimalt were moved to the large NET and trades training establishment in H.M.C.S. *Cornwallis* situated at Deep Brook, Nova Scotia. It was opened in the spring of 1943 and here, in June 1944, the cookery school opened. One preliminary school was Central Technical School in Toronto, followed by a period in a navy galley in the *Cornwallis*. The Halifax school was reserved for the training of leading and PO cooks, as well as warrant cooks, men commissioned from the ranks who carried the title “mister,” which was meant to point out their lower officer status, like that of a sub-lieutenant.<sup>20</sup> The training of the men who were to become victuallers is not mentioned by Tucker, but Doug Berry opened a window on that subject. “I was in Halifax when I joined [1940]. I was given a morning of squad (foot) drill, and an afternoon of rifle drill. After that I was sent to a church basement and I learned how to fill in forms so that I could order food for a ship. That was it; I was now a probationary victualling assistant.”<sup>21</sup> After one day’s instruction the former University of Saskatchewan theology student became responsible for acquiring food for his future ships.

After a cook had been trained he waited for a draft. Says Walter Swereyda “A PO in *Naden* told me, ‘Son, keep your nose clean and pay attention and I’ll get you a good draft.’ And he did. The other guys got sent to Halifax and I went to Prince Rupert to Q-122, a fairmile.”<sup>22</sup> He spent the war on this coastal patrol vessel. Early in his career, Fred Shobbrook had three sea drafts interspersed with time in galleys ashore while awaiting those drafts. First was the *Malaspina*, a former Department of Fisheries vessel based at Esquimalt. It carried no armament and therefore there was no daily tot of rum.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Earl Chadwick.

<sup>20</sup> Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, 311.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Walter Swereyda.

A coal burner which filled the galley with smoke, it trekked back and forth between Esquimalt and Comox carrying NETS to the rifle range there. It also towed targets for shore batteries. The ship's company numbered a dozen or so men. Six months on calm seas and he was sent to H.M.C.S. *Givenchy*, the manning depot at Esquimalt. *Kelowna* followed. Here the smell of diesel fuel filled the galley, which was situated over the engine room. His milk was slung outside the galley and it had to be used quickly. He had a tiny sink and stove, a counter for a preparation area, and all his utensils were stowed under it. Sea bars were rigged on the stove to prevent pots from sliding off in a rough sea. He cooked for almost fifty men. A draft to Halifax followed and there he worked in the main galley at the large shore establishment, H.M.C.S. *Stadacona*. The *Mont Joli* draft came next. Spending four days in, and four days out, it examined merchant ships entering Halifax harbour. It also sat over a mine field protecting the entrance to Halifax Harbour and was outside the anti-submarine nets. It had a crew of eight officers and men. He wanted a sea draft and to get overseas, but his next draft was to H.M.C.S. *Avalon*, a shore establishment outside of St. John's cooking in the main galley. "I volunteered for frogman duty. I volunteered for commando duty. After VE Day I volunteered to bring ships back to Canada from Scotland, but the answer was always the same, 'We need you ashore.'"<sup>23</sup> George MacIntyre was liberated from cooking for NETS on George's Island only to find himself in the *Stadacona*.<sup>24</sup> He did not get to sea for another two years. Ontario farm boy Earl Chadwick's wish came true when, in September 1944, he was drafted to *Bowmanville*. Here he stayed until brought ashore for the war in the Pacific. It ended almost as soon as he arrived in Halifax. Given the "last in, last out" rule for demobilisation, he was kept to cook in *Stadacona*'s main galley until discharged in February 1946.<sup>25</sup>

Cooks knew when they joined their ships that in all but the smallest vessels they had to rely on the victualler to acquire provisions for their galleys. Depending upon how adept he was at persuading or even bribing the victuallers ashore, most often with his own rum or that of the other ratings, he could enhance the ship's official rations with extra and even scarce foods. A central messing system was used

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with George MacIntyre and Earl Chadwick.



Petty Officer Cook Bert Grant (left) and his assistants preparing Christmas puddings, H.M.C.S. *Stadcona*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, December 1941. [Library and Archives Canada PA 105652]

whereby all foods prepared by the ship's galley—or the wardroom galley in the case of destroyers and above—had to be supplied in specific amounts for each meal. In most ships, staples such as bread, coffee, tea, milk, jams, salt, and sugar were distributed from the victualler's storeroom at certain times each day. With the ship's senior victualler, cooks prepared their menus for a week at a time. If a sick berth attendant (SBA) was a part of the ship's company he reviewed it to ensure that the meals were healthy, and it then went to the CO for approval. The victualler had a manual which laid out what quantities were to be given out for each seaman, and in the first two years of the war this was done to RN standards and as inexpensively as possible. This was the “cost per day rate.” It was higher at sea, but dropped in port when most of the crew ate some meals ashore. Victualling Assistant Doug Berry was in the corvettes *Bouctouche* and *Lethbridge* and when in the former he maintains that the cost per day in 1941 was thirty-seven cents; however, Peter Fane, also a victualler, has argued that it was in the low forties by 1943 when he joined the frigate *La Salle*. Ivan McCabe, leading cook in the corvette *Orangeville*, cites “about a dollar per day per man”

when he was in the ship from 1944 to 1945.<sup>26</sup> Shore based victuallers, Berry maintains, took pride in dictating that the rate be kept down. Thirty-seven cents a day, he said, was the RN rate in 1941 and the RCN doctors in Iceland could see that Canadian seamen were not being fed properly. The medical branch ordered changes and he was told to “Feed them properly; they’re Canadians.” The crew, he says, were eating “lots of chocolate bars, and when the cooks were not very good, we went hungry for a well-prepared meal.” His pre-change menu for the ship’s company in *Bouctouche* for the week of 21–27 September 1941 still included “tea” before the supper meal: jam for three days, one day of cheese, two more days with jam, and then “cake.” A new ration schedule was introduced after his second trip to Iceland in October 1942. The fresh milk allowance was doubled, and the canned milk ration went up from two to fourteen ounces per day. Canned fruit or juice had to be served every day. Dessert was to be served for supper every night instead of just on Sundays. Although the British habit of taking “tea” around 4 p.m. remained in the menu, the jam and cheese were dropped in favour of anything better at hand “Even the jam ration [in the messes where the men ate and slept] went up, though not by much.”<sup>27</sup>

These rations for the ships came from central victualling depots (CVDS) in the major ports where Canadian ships operated and several locations in the UK. On a small vessel with no victualler, the cook went to the CVD. The victualler on other vessels was responsible for getting the food that the cook would prepare. He had to get it onboard and stowed, and when the cook needed it he brought it to the galley. In Halifax and Esquimalt, says Fred Shobbrook, the trucks would arrive at the jetty but the handlers might have already helped themselves to what they wanted. These were “rabbits,” things that were taken home by the looters or for trading with others ashore. “They [looters] were navy. These were tea, coffee, anything was up for theft.” Most carefully guarded of all by the victuallers when it came aboard were the ten gallon kegs of rum, says Peter Fane.<sup>28</sup> In Canada the food was processed by Canadian firms or imported from

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories* 131–132; Peter Fane, *Memories of my lower deck life in the Royal Canadian Navy, 1943 to 1955*. (Manuscript, n.d.) 17; O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

<sup>28</sup> Interviews with Peter Fane and Fred Shobbrook.

the United States, but overseas most food had to be acquired locally. In St. John's, food ashore might be skimpy and limited to meat and potatoes, said an officer in the corvette *Trillium*.<sup>29</sup> In Prince Rupert, Cook Walter Swereyda drew provisions for a week at a time and several seamen helped him store ship. *Madawaska* operated out of St. Jean on the Island of Orleans, outside Quebec City, and there the cook would order his food supplies and they would arrive in a station wagon.<sup>30</sup> In wartime Halifax, certain items were restricted in quantity; ships were rationed to fifteen gallons of ice cream once a month because the number of ships in port put a heavy load on local dairies.<sup>31</sup> In British ports, ice cream was unobtainable.

Ships operating out of British ports were dissatisfied with the quality of food delivered onboard. William H. Pugsley was a seaman serving in American town-class lend-lease destroyer *St. Clair* had been trapped in a violent storm that had lasted eight days and this ship, thanks to its poor sea handling qualities, wallowed about using up fuel and food. When it came alongside in Gourock, Scotland the stop brought only four bags of potatoes, a side of beef, and orders to refuel and to get back to sea at once to pick up a convoy.<sup>32</sup> In the UK beef, pork, and mutton were available, but the beef and pork had been frozen far too long and both were tough. The mutton was described as “greasy and tough,” but if ships sailed out of Milford Haven, South Wales, cooks worked out a deal with local farmers for real milk and butter.<sup>33</sup> Ron Rhine was a WT in a motor torpedo boat (MTB) operating out of various English Channel ports. It had a “very small galley” and the food supplied by the RN was “third grade canned stew, canned pig-in-a-polk ... We scrounged as much as possible to get better food, even eating winkles, horse meat, [or] illicit fish from a depth charge explosion ...” He remembers the canned stews even today because they were not much more than bits of potatoes, turnips, and meat. Milk was prized. While his boat was being repaired, he snuck out with a friend who knew how to milk cows and milked nearby Holsteins at two in the morning. Eventually a message arrived in the

<sup>29</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Riley, *A Sparker's War*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Peter Fane.

<sup>32</sup> William H. Pugsley, *Sailor Remember* (Toronto: Collins, 1948), 73.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 266.

MTB to the effect that whoever was “stealing the milk reserved for pregnant mothers and children” would be “severely prosecuted.” He presented his captain with the message just as the CO was drinking his morning glass of purloined milk, and was informed that if he knew of anybody “who would dare to do such a thing, please advise him to quit immediately.”<sup>34</sup>

Taking onboard enough stores for a month or more at sea on convoy escort duty was a problem because none of the escorts were designed to spend long periods of time at sea, and therefore lacked storage space. Storing ship was assigned to a “hold party” which normally took the form of the duty watch. The senior victualler and the coxswain (cox’n), the senior member of the seaman branch onboard, and the man who took the helm entering and leaving harbour and during action stations, would decide where the food would go.<sup>35</sup> Bill Wilson of *Ottawa (2nd)* remarked “They found all sorts of nooks and crannies to put the stuff away.”<sup>36</sup> However, not all of the ordered food would find its way to the galley; some had been ‘liberated’ beforehand by the truck drivers or the hold party. Albert White, an able seaman (AB) serving in the corvette *Rosthern* pointed out that, “When we were loading supplies in port, we would get some fruit or canned items and put them in our lockers in case of bad weather at sea.”<sup>37</sup>

The most memorable Canadian cheddar cheese that Victualler Murray Laidlaw of *Chicoutimi* remembers having eaten was lashed in its large wooden box to the mainmast before the ship left harbour. At the beginning of the trip there were ten days of bad weather, and for all of that time the sea poured over the box, soaking it through. “When the weather moderated some we broke into the cheese and, to this day, I still maintain it was the best Canadian cheddar I’ve ever tasted. Cured by Atlantic water—what an advertisement!”<sup>38</sup> The vegetables did not fare as well. Most of the potatoes and other vegetables were kept in the “spud locker” on the upper deck; this was true for corvettes, minesweepers, and destroyers. The weather took its toll, and before long not all were edible.<sup>39</sup> Even when food was

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ron Rhine.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Bill Wilson and Peter Fane.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Bill Wilson.

<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews with Doug Berry, Joe (“Tug”) Wilson, and Bill Wilson.

stored below deck, the force of the sea could determine diet. Rodney Pike, CO of *Orangeville*, noted in his diary that water had forced its way down a mushroom ventilator on the quarterdeck and into the area where the ship's supply of flour was stored, ruining much of it.<sup>40</sup> Murray Laidlaw's tinned goods fared no better; *Chicoutimi* took in water during a "bad storm" and it flooded the space where they were stored, washing off all of the labels. "As a consequence it was a surprise with every can we opened."<sup>41</sup> Incidents such as these were common.

Even more common was the onboard theft of provisions. Cook Fred Shobbrook noted that "The victuallers had to keep everything under lock and key or the guys would steal it, take it to the mess, or take it ashore and sell it or trade it for booze." But who watched the victualler? Shobbrook explained that supplies for one of his ships were disappearing because some POS and others onboard were stealing food and selling it ashore. An investigation followed and the PO victualler was drafted to Halifax.<sup>42</sup> His fate remained unknown. Fortunately, not all were like him. Bill Wilson described the victuallers in *Ottawa (2nd)* as "great" men who "guarded the food supply with an iron hand."<sup>43</sup> Indeed they had to, says Doug Berry. Onions were prized in both *Bouctouche* and *Lethbridge*, and "I had to lock up the onions when we were going to [Northern] Ireland because the men heard there was a shortage there." Further, in these two ships "The only food out was jam; the rest was locked up."<sup>44</sup> He had every need to because, as Tom Baird of the corvette *Regina* explained, the chiefs' and POS' mess onboard was "always loaded." Why? The steam line to the steering engine went through the victualler's storeroom, and "We always made sure one of the joints on this line would spring a leak." This necessitated a repair job after supper; at that time the stokers could gain legitimate entry, and then proceed to raid the stores for extra food in the form of jam, sugar, tea, and coffee. "When we

<sup>40</sup> Royal Alberta Museum (RAM), Hol.142.1g., Diary of Rodney A. Pike, 8 February 1945.

<sup>41</sup> O'Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Bill Wilson.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.



Stand easy in the stoker's mess of the corvette H.M.C.S. *Kamsack*, 17 February 1943. [Library and Archives Canada PA 204630]

repaired one joint, we always eased off a couple of bolts on another so it would go let go shortly.”<sup>45</sup>

Equally inventive were the communications rates of the corvette *Owen Sound*. The locks on the victualler's food locker were similar to the locks on the wireless radio cabin, but with different keys. On the grounds that the officers were getting more canned fruits, they acted. When the victualler was making his trips back and forth to the galley, he left his lock hanging on the door but not secured, and the communicators took it off and put theirs on in its place. “After he left, we removed our lock, went in and liberated some of the stores, then put his lock back on. We were having fruit juice for quite a while after that.”<sup>46</sup>

The supplies of the mess were also taken ashore at a time when there was rationing in North America and the UK. George Hollins in the corvette *Midland* recalls, “One of the stokers with friends in Halifax regularly smuggled tea and sugar ashore by securing a bag around each knee, well concealed by his bell-bottom trousers.”<sup>47</sup> As other wartime seamen have stated, a seaman could breeze out the

<sup>45</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 143–144.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



gate of the Halifax dockyard, passing the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment and the RCN's shore patrol, without ever being stopped and searched. The same applied in Esquimalt and St. John's, but in Londonderry and the RN ports in southern England it took a nudge, a wink, and a bribe in order to get through the dockyard gate.<sup>48</sup> But some cooks were also creative, says Ivan McCabe, leading cook in *Orangeville* by 1944–1945. "Cooks could get away with anything and usually did. I remember if we were short, we'd sell twenty-five pounds of tea for twenty-five pounds sterling in Ireland." Further, he states, "The cook never had to worry about his share of rum. We always had rum for small favours."<sup>49</sup> Apparently he had not heard about the Cook Doug Berry sailed with in either *Bouctouche* or *Lethbridge* who stole money from Berry and others, and also stole the ship's stores and tried to sell them ashore. He was caught, put in cells, "and kicked out," given a misconduct release.<sup>50</sup>

If the food the cook planned to serve had not been stolen at some point, or destroyed by the weather, it might end up spoiling. Refrigeration played a key role. In Walter Swereyda's fairmile, he could store only a week's worth of food; his refrigeration consisted of an ice block cooler in the stern. Meat had to be consumed almost immediately, and though bread was supplied, he baked his own as well as pies, cinnamon buns, and pie fillings. He had no room for milk. Coffee, tea, butter, and meat were all rationed. The men also fished with depth charges.<sup>51</sup> Fred Shobbrook was no better off in *Malaspina*; his cooler also relied on blocks of ice so the meat had to be consumed quickly, with pork first and then within three to four days the beef. His vegetables would last only a week.<sup>52</sup>

The destroyers, frigates, corvettes, minesweepers, and fairmiles were designed by British firms and the British attitude towards food preservation was different from that of Canadians. The first generation corvettes had no coolers at all. Corvettes *Hepatica* and *Mayflower*, commissioned in 1940 and 1941 respectively, had a "beef screen," which was nothing more than an area on the upper deck where meat

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with Fred Dobing, Tom MacIntyre, Bob Small, Ron Rhine, and Gus Blochlinger.

<sup>49</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 145.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Walter Swereyda.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

and vegetables were stored in the open air. These “screens” were large lockers of solid metal half way up, with metal screens to keep out flies on all sides to the top to permit the air to flow through, thereby supposedly cooling the contents. Canvas coverings were usually placed over these in an attempt to keep out the spray and waves.<sup>53</sup> Tom MacIntyre experienced trying to eat the meat when taking *Hepatica* to the UK and was not impressed. Asdic (sonar) operator Jim Sharpe of the corvette *Windflower* did not see beef screens as “all bad,” but did note that in the summer the meat had to be cooked as roasts after the first few days, and the balance still in the beef screen later could be salvaged after the exposed bits had been removed.<sup>54</sup> Some coolers were installed during refits, as in the case of the corvette *Halifax*. Jim Robinson commented that “They were not that reliable. Every so often [they] would act up. ... We could take a little green, but the VAs and the cooks weren’t taking any chances.”<sup>55</sup> Leading Seaman Frank Moss was in the corvette *Calgary* when it headed overseas with Christmas turkeys in the cooler. When Christmas came, “the turkeys cooked up picture perfect. Then we began to carve them. What a stench. They were rotten and had to be trashed. We ended up having ham and eggs.”<sup>56</sup> Former butcher and Torpedoman Robert D.W. Sutherland, also testified to the ineffectiveness of the earliest coolers, stating that “The refrigeration didn’t work very well at the beginning of the war.” He also noted that some ships managed to get pre-cooked beef in an attempt to ward off spoilage. The corvette *Frontenac* got pork sausages that were often already going bad and “We got rid of pork in a big hurry.”<sup>57</sup>

Canadian seamen invariably judged what they ate in terms of what American and British seamen ate. There was no disagreement: the Americans ate the best and the British the worst. Any time the Americans were present, you got the best of food. The Americans had the best of everything: ice cream, fresh fruit, freshly baked bread onboard or ashore, and all because their ships were equipped with

<sup>53</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 132.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Jim (“Robby”) Robinson.

<sup>56</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 178.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Bob (“Bobby”) D.W. Sutherland.

their men in mind.<sup>58</sup> American ships were “dry,” so Canadian rum in the hands of an enterprising victualler could get food not normally available to RCN ships.<sup>59</sup> Canadians seamen enjoyed grousing about their food, but someone in the mess who had seen RN “grub,” or worse yet experienced it, could shut them up.

Leading Telegraphist Jim Fowler was serving in H.M.S. *Spirea* as part of the Gibraltar Defence Force escorting small convoys, with two to three days at sea and two to three days in port. “We did not live well, either in Gib[raltar] or on the periods at sea. In harbour our diet was completely devoid of potatoes, vegetables or fruits, with the exception of bananas of which there was a glut. We had little fresh meat in harbour or at sea as we had no fridge or pantries.” The diet was poor and monotonous.<sup>60</sup> Stoker PO Nick Balash had an RN draft and described living in an RN mess as tough. “We had it pretty good compared with them.” He met a Canadian friend serving in an RN frigate while both were in Gibraltar, and brought him back to the corvette *Kirkland Lake*. Here he loaded him up with tea, sugar, bacon, jam, and other items to share with his British messmates.<sup>61</sup> William H. Pugsley experienced an RN mess ashore at Scapa Flow. In the cafeteria area was a large sign on the box of buns, “Do you really want this bun?” At the other end of the food line there was another box where seamen could return the bun, “if by the time you’d got the rest of your grub you decided you weren’t really so keen on the bun.”<sup>62</sup>

Gordon Wright was a coder serving in the frigate *Swansea* which was on loan to the RN. The British had a contract with Australian and New Zealand firms for mutton, so Canadians got that over and over. He described it as terrible. Canadians got a British diet, and “A block of cheese and some bread were typical RN food. And kippers, smoked herring.”<sup>63</sup> When this diet was recounted to RCN Victualler Doug Berry, he confirmed that before the changes made in late 1942

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with Tom MacIntyre, Fred Dobing, Sid Dobing, Fred Shobbrook, Ron Rhine, and Earl Chadwick; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 145.

<sup>59</sup> Interviews with George MacIntyre, Sid Dobing, Bob Small, Stan Jones, Doug Berry, and Gordon Wright.

<sup>60</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 163.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Nick Balash.

<sup>62</sup> Pugsley, *Sailor Remember*, 166.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Gordon Wright.

to the RCN diet, this was the type of menu he and the cook were expected to prepare. It was one the RN had dictated in 1937 for the peace time fleet. However, Berry pointed out that from the very start of the war, the RCN did not have a bread ration of so many ounces per day; there was no serving of entrails, kidneys, and other organs, and unless no other meat was available, no mutton was ordered. When he ordered lamb he got a whole sheep, but nobody on board was willing to eat it so he threw it over the side. The RN diet, he believed, "... was designed to keep a man alive, but not much more."<sup>64</sup>

Early on in the war some suppliers even sent meat to the ships by the side because it was the RN practice to butcher animals on the upper deck. This practice had largely ended in the RCN by early 1943.<sup>65</sup> Mutton, whenever sent to most ships, usually went over the side because the men refused to eat it.<sup>66</sup> Horsemeat, however, won the approval of Garfield Harvie on a trip from St. John's to Scotland. He ate it again in England and described it as "delicious." Charles (Chuck) Moser was on the Triangle Run from New York to Boston to Halifax. He had horse meat in Boston, and voiced his approval.<sup>67</sup> The CVD in St. John's may have been the only naval stores providing horsemeat. Bacon in Canada most often came onboard in slabs, but that supplied in the UK to ships like the corvette *Agassiz* in which Walter C. Burch was serving, in tins, as did the butter.<sup>68</sup>

Un sliced bread was usually stored on the upper deck in a locker where it was normally exposed to the spray and waves, and under certain wind conditions, funnel gasses, and within a few days, it would begin to develop "green icing" or "fluff;" seamen's terms for mould. The duty cook-of-the-mess, had the task of peeling or cutting it off.<sup>69</sup> Seamen making the North Atlantic run from St. John's to Londonderry tended to favour bread from Newfoundland over the Irish version. Bill Wilson describes the average Newfoundland loaf as "a little bit bigger than the normal loaf size." The crust was smooth,

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews with Fred Shobbrook, Peter Fane, and Bob ("Bobby") D.W. Sutherland.

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with Joe ("Tug") Wilson and Doug Berry.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with Garfield Harvie and Charles ("Chuck") Moser.

<sup>68</sup> University of Victoria Oral History Project (UVOHP), CPO Walter Chester Burch, Tape 2, Side A.

<sup>69</sup> O'Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 53; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 140; Gerry Davis; UVOHP: CPO Walter Chester Burch, Tape 2, Side A.

heavy, and thick, and it did not normally start to turn green until day four or five. Once the crust was cut off the bread inside was “pretty good.”<sup>70</sup> The bread acquired in Londonderry came from a British supply depot. Roy G. Young of the *Saskatchewan*, described the flavour as “terrible” and remarked that it was capable of producing, “enormous itchy hives on most of those who consumed it.” If toasted the smell was malodorous.<sup>71</sup> It was Doug Berry’s duty to order it and to have it sent to the ship. He said “The bread was made with water and not milk and it was horrible.”<sup>72</sup> Allan Riley in the destroyer *Skeena*, said that Irish bread had “the consistency of cobblestones.”<sup>73</sup> In the destroyer *Haida*, fellow WT operator Harold Dixon described this bread as “about twelve inches long and five inches square, dark in colour and [having] the appearance of a brick.” On one occasion it was thrown overboard in Plymouth Harbour, angering shore authorities, who rightly saw no humour in that thoughtless act given that the British people were under tight rationing. *Haida* soon solved the problem by substituting flour for their bread ration and two cooks, who were originally bakers, made bread for the ship’s company.<sup>74</sup>

The baking of bread onboard worked out well if there was a cook who knew how to bake. When tasty bread was baked onboard, the cooks in the *Saskatchewan*, the *Skeena*, the *Wentworth*, and the *Dauphin* rationed it at one slice per man.<sup>75</sup> Signalman Herb Jones, in the *Dauphin*, recounts that the cook took time to learn the art of bread making, progress slowly “because of using no yeast.”<sup>76</sup> Several other solutions emerged. One was to acquire a sack of flour to take to a naval bakery in Londonderry where two-thirds of the loaves went to the ship and the other one-third to the bakers there “for services rendered.” Another solution was to trade the ship’s tea and coffee to the Irish boatmen who met the ships entering Londonderry in return for “huge loaves of home-made bread and jam or honey.”<sup>77</sup> Bill St.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Bill Wilson.

<sup>71</sup> Naval Officers’ Association of Canada (NOAC), *Salty Dips* (SD), V. 5, 173–174.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

<sup>73</sup> Riley, *A Sparker’s War*, 74.

<sup>74</sup> Ray White, Jim Sylvester, Walter Blanchard, and Jim Brewer, “Naval Radio Operation During World War II” available: [http://jproc.ca/rrp/nro\\_ww2.html](http://jproc.ca/rrp/nro_ww2.html), [last accessed: 3 October 2015].

<sup>75</sup> NOAC, *SD*, Vol.5, 174; Riley, *A Sparker’s War*, 74, 138.

<sup>76</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 53.

<sup>77</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 141.

Clair of the *Port Arthur* saw a different practice again. Fresh bread acquired in port was dried out on top of the boilers and soaked in pail of water and put it in the galley oven to bake when the crew wanted them. “It would come out fresh again. Our cooks never made bread at sea.”<sup>78</sup> In the *Louisburg (2nd)*, Steward E. R. Weber was happy because the ship’s cook traded his rum regularly for good flour. His ship became “the best fed ship in the fleet because we had delicious white bread baked by our resourceful cook.”<sup>79</sup>

After bread, milk was the food that seamen missed the most because both were reminders of home. Milk came in ten-gallon cans, but without refrigeration it had to be consumed within three days. Each morning the cook-of-the-mess collected a jug full for his mess mates and that was all they were entitled. At the beginning of the war each man was entitled to only two ounces of any kind per day, but after the reforms of 1942 it was increased to fourteen ounces. This was well-received by the ratings.<sup>80</sup> When the milk ran out the victualler had two choices: condensed milk or powdered milk. The condensed milk was tolerated but powdered milk was not. “Nobody liked it” says Fred Shobbrook. Bill Kilpatrick says “Of course, I’ve never had powdered milk since the war.”<sup>81</sup> The *Trentonian* had embarked its own surgeon lieutenant, and he would not permit the ship to buy fresh milk ashore in Milford Haven, South Wales, because although it was pasteurised, it was distributed “in a most unsafe, unsanitary manner.”<sup>82</sup> Butter was hard to come by and was usually tinned and salted. British margarine, says Bill Wilson, was not very good. When in Canada, Fred Shobbrook was able to obtain American margarine which “wasn’t bad at all.”<sup>83</sup>

The one vegetable that was fairly easy to obtain, bring onboard, and keep for a time was the humble potato. Fresh vegetables of other kinds were hard to come by. Lack of storage space and lack of refrigeration meant that whatever came onboard had to be

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> NOAC, *SD*, Vol. 5, 54.

<sup>80</sup> Interviews with Peter Fane, Fred Shobbrook, Doug Berry, and Alex (Shilly) Shillington.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> Roger Litwiller, *White Ensign Flying Corvette HMCS Trentonian* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014), 105.

<sup>83</sup> Interviews with Bill Wilson and Fred Shobbrook.



Leading Seaman Frank Curry, R.C.N.V.R., with Portuguese children, HortaFayal, Azores. Jan. 1945. [Library and Archives Canada PA 125850]

consumed quickly, otherwise it was canned and dehydrated products. The canned versions were tolerated but the dehydrated ones were disliked.<sup>84</sup> Fresh fruit was also hard to obtain except when in Canada, visiting American ports, steaming overseas in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, or the Azores. Accounts officers of the seventeen RCN corvettes operating in the Mediterranean in the post-Operation Torch months bought fresh fruit and vegetables ashore at market stalls in places like Gibraltar and Bone, Algeria, because neither the RN nor the RCN supplied them directly. In the opinion of Stoker “Moose” McGill of the *Kitchener*, other than that the food was lousy.<sup>85</sup> When the *Chaudiere*—escorting convoys north from the Azores—stopped to refuel in Horta, “many crates of pineapples, bananas and other forgotten luxuries were brought onboard.”<sup>86</sup> This was not a common occurrence.

Eggs were prized, but supplies were erratic and often unsatisfactory. Ivan McCabe in *Orangeville* used the method recommended in *BR5*

<sup>84</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre, Walter Burch, UVOHP; Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>85</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 178.

<sup>86</sup> Charles P. Nixon, *A River in September A Sketch of the Life and Times of H.M.C.S. Chaudiere, A Canadian Destroyer 1943–1945, as told by her Captain* (Montreal, John N. Mappin, 1995), 13.

to determine their worth. “We put them in a pot of water and if they floated we threw them away.”<sup>87</sup> Tea and coffee were also valued, but could be prepared only after the boilers had received their share of the available fresh, distilled water. Tea, says Arthur Wallace of the frigate *Runnymede*, was much easier to make than coffee.<sup>88</sup> If the ship’s evaporator was malfunctioning, drinking water was rationed. Brown sugar, explained Roy Young in *Saskatchewan*, came in hefty sacks, usually in lump form. The sacks, in transit to the messes and galley, often broke and ended on the deck, leaving a sticky skim on which men could slip.<sup>89</sup>

Heavy weather had a significant impact on a rating’s diet because cooks were unable to prepare hot meals. The result was sandwiches and tinned food; Spam, Klik (the Canadian version of Spam) sardines, and tinned peaches.<sup>90</sup> Many tinned foods were from the UK, but others were Canadian, such as Paddler Salmon and Soo Italian Prunes, also known by seamen as “CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway] strawberries.” Herrings in tomato sauce were often processed in Canada. Corned beef was common, as were sauerkraut, wieners, and tinned sausages.<sup>91</sup> Not all were enjoyed.

One other food was in its own class: hardtack. This biscuit had a very long naval history and went back before Admiral Nelson’s time. Murray Laidlaw describes it as what the men reverted to when bread ran out. It was a food of last resort. Hardtack was “so hard the man has yet to be born who would take a bite from one. You either split them with a knife or dunked them and still came up with a tasteless product.”<sup>92</sup> John Sorochan identified their origin as Londonderry, and Fred Shobbrook listed their ingredients as “flour, water and a bit of salt.”<sup>93</sup> They had their detractors. Edward O’Connor said they

<sup>87</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 133.

<sup>88</sup> G.E. Arthur Wallace, *Beneath the Barberpole* (Victoria: Privately published, 2007), 52; Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>89</sup> NOAC, *SD*, Vol. 5, 174.

<sup>90</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 138.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews with Bill Wilson, Gus Blochlinger, George MacIntyre, and C.S. Anthony (“Tony”) Gardener; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 138; Bill Perry, *The Lower Deck. Memories of a Wartime Sailor* (Privately published: Sidney, BC, 2005), 75; Interview with Tom Scade.

<sup>92</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Interviews with John Sorochan and Fred Shobbrook.





Frank Curry and his catch, H.M.C.S. *Caraquet* 1943. [Library and Archives Canada PA 125957]

had “the texture of concrete and the taste of cardboard.” Archie Marsh agreed: “they must have been mixed with cement. Soaking them in hot water or cocoa would not soften them.” George Hollins was of the opinion that “A chisel and hammer would be adequate tools to split this large, round ... biscuit into bite-sized chunks.” Reg Baker’s opinion was similar “You would think they came out of a cement mixer.”<sup>94</sup> But hardtack also had supporters, including Baker who admitted that he had split them, toasted, and buttered them and added strawberry jam. Bill Kilpatrick admitted that he “actually grew to like it.” As Joe Wilson pointed out, there was always a tin in the mess and you could eat all that you wanted.<sup>95</sup> For the seasick seaman they were a godsend because they were often all he could keep down.

As indicated earlier, food supplies would run out, especially on extended missions. The *Ottawa (2nd)* was once at sea for thirty-six days, part of which was spent towing another destroyer, *Restigouche*, into port. Out came the less desirable foods, including corned beef, Spam and Klik, which would be diced, roasted, fried, and served in any number of ways. Bad weather had an impact and could leave a

<sup>94</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 8; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 142.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Joe (“Tug”) Wilson.

warship struggling for days trying to make way in mountainous seas. Cooks and victuallers who were poor planners and did not order enough food did not help either.<sup>96</sup> Walter Swereyda had a mate in a west coast minesweeper who was “soft-hearted” in that he gave extra food to seamen who came begging for more. “The result was that there wouldn’t be enough to eat.”<sup>97</sup> *Skeena* struggled into St. John’s with Allan Riley onboard, and by the time she had secured alongside the ship’s company had been without water for three days and had almost run out of general food. “The last meal I remember was a stew consisting of gravy devoid of the vegetables and meat.”<sup>98</sup> But some seamen, like Tom Scade in *Wasaga*, knew that for the last few days at sea there would not be much choice, and whatever the cook could find you would get. “It might be mutton at the end. Sometimes there’d be a little hair on it, but that was all right. I didn’t mind it.”<sup>99</sup> His sentiments were not widely shared.

Hungry seamen found alternate sources of food. Like many, Garfield Harvie got parcels from home which were largely food. Red Cross parcels sometimes arrived—one to a man—and they consisted of an assortment of items, including canned meat, fish, cheese, powdered milk, biscuits, and candy.<sup>100</sup> Although the fairmiles and examination vessels did not have a ship’s canteen, space was found in the other classes of ships for one, and here seamen could buy foods such as chocolate bars and various other types of candy and cookies. Signalman Herb Jones traded the ship’s tea to Irish “bumboats” and in return received eggs and bottles of Guinness. Asdic operator John Stables bought eggs, but after the boats had pulled away, he went below to the mess to fry them up on the hot plate and discovered that they were rotten.<sup>101</sup> While off the coast of Labrador, Doug Berry bought fish over the side from some Newfoundland fishermen. In return for jam and sugar he got a wooden barrel filled with freshly salted salmon. But there was a problem; the cook was from Saskatchewan and did not know how to get the salt out. In the end Berry had to give the barrel to the crew of an RN ship in St. John’s,

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Bill Wilson.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Walter Swereyda.

<sup>98</sup> Riley, *A Sparker’s War*, 64.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Tom Scade.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Garfield Harvie; Litwiller, *White Ensign Flying Corvette HMCS Trentonian*, 133.

<sup>101</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 53; Interview with John Stables.

explaining “They knew how to get the salt out of the salmon.” Lloyd Jewers was more fortunate. *Hepatica* arrived off Beaver Island and came upon a fisherman he knew. The result was that “we had the best mess of fish that was available.”<sup>102</sup> Fred Shobbrook in *Malaspina* steamed regularly to Comox and here the crew dug up oysters. When he was in *Mont Joli*, the CO’s father, a Nova Scotia lobster fisherman, supplied the ship with fresh lobsters. Shobbrook kept them on ice and the crew ate well. When drafted to *Avalon*, he was able to get Atlantic cod fresh from the flakes at Bay Bulls.<sup>103</sup> But by far the most common way of supplementing the diet of the ship’s company was to fish for Atlantic cod with a depth charge. With the CO’s permission, the Asdic operator would locate them—known as “going fishing”—and then the torpedomen would drop the charge. Stunned, the fish would float on the surface, the whaler would be lowered, the catch was scooped up, and brought onboard for filleting. They were a welcome change of diet.<sup>104</sup>

With a few exceptions, very few RCN cooks ever worked in a large galley or in ships with cafeterias. Their ships were their temporary homes, and work space was always limited. The size of a cook’s galley was directly related to the class of the ship. In most cases galleys were located midship, usually abaft (behind) the funnel, and ventilated by their own air intakes in the deckhead (ceiling). In the Tribal-class destroyer, of which there were only four before 1945, the galley was fitted with a large oil stove complete with four burners and two ovens, as well as various heated appliances, a dough mixer, and a vegetable peeling machine. Utensils and foodstuffs were stowed in cupboards and lockers sited throughout the space. Depending upon the ship, the cook of the mess might enter through the port door, pick up the men’s meals, and exit by the starboard door.<sup>105</sup> Bill Wilson recalls that the galley in River-class destroyers measured nine feet long and ten feet wide. After the RCN acquired the River-class destroyers from the RN, the two coal stoves were converted to oil. There was a medium-

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Doug Berry; *BR5*, 56; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 142.

<sup>103</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 142; Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with John Stables; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 142; Litwiller, *White Ensign Flying Corvette HMCS Trentonian*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Hal Zerbin.

sized water boiler, a small sink, sets of storage cupboards, and two skylights overhead. The space was accessed from both the port and starboard sides, with one step up, and the entryways were fitted with two hinged (Dutch) half doors. Serving was from the starboard door.<sup>106</sup>

Ivan McCabe cooked in *Orangeville*, one of the last and largest corvettes, and says his galley was about eight by twelve feet. For some reason it had a coal-fired stove with an oven on each side of the firebox, whereas most other corvettes were oil-fired.<sup>107</sup> Jim Russell of *Calgary* described these oil-fired stoves as not very reliable.<sup>108</sup> The galley had scuttles (port holes) which had to be closed and blacked out at night, as were the doors. There was a skylight over the galley but no ventilation nor fans. The galley had Dutch doors, with the top half open and the bottom bolted shut.<sup>109</sup> All classes had their stove's oil coming in through a pipe at the back controlled from somewhere else in the ship. In corvettes the galley was over the engineering machinery spaces. Fred Shobbrook estimates that a minesweeper's galley was about six feet by six feet. The layout was also about the same as in a corvette: a small sink; an oil stove "about the same size as a regular oil stove at home" and with a "good oven and grill," and a preparation counter with cupboards below for stowing his utensils and various things needed to prepare food. There was a small refrigerator below the counter. He pointed out that all stoves were fitted with what he referred to as "sea bars" —but which had other names in other ships such as "baffle plates" and "fiddles"—to prevent the pots on the stove from toppling over and spilling their contents across the deck. These bars were adjustable and they fitted into lugs on the stove top.<sup>110</sup>

Shobbrook's other drafts presented him with another type of galley, one built for a vessel that would only be at sea for short periods of time. *Malaspina's* was, he believes, about six feet long by about four feet wide. The stove was coal-fired, had four heating surfaces, and a small oven. The sink was tiny and the preparation area limited. Pot storage was overhead and in the small cupboards. The ice-block

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Bill Wilson.

<sup>107</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 135.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–135, 171; Interview with Joe ("Tug") Wilson.

<sup>110</sup> Interviews with Fred Shobbrook and Joe ("Tug") Wilson.

refrigerator was below the main deck. When first onboard he shared this cramped space with a senior cook who came with the ship when it was taken over from the Department of Fisheries by the RCN for duty on the west coast.<sup>111</sup> *Mont Joli* was chartered by the RCN and Shobbrook thinks that it might have been a trawler. It had a large galley for such a small vessel; he believes it was about six by eight feet. Surprisingly, it had “a good stove, oven, sink, and cupboard space.” Ice was stowed for keeping the milk and meat cool.<sup>112</sup> Walter Swereyda could only remember his fairmile galley as being very small with an oil stove. It was about three feet wide and had a small sink.<sup>113</sup>

Unlike the cooks in larger vessels, while in *Malaspina* and *Mont Joli*, Shobbrook did not usually have to deal with a deck beneath his feet which yawed, rolled, and pitched. To quote Jim Russell “Cooking aboard a corvette wasn’t all sunshine.”<sup>114</sup> In the early years of the war, an RCN cook was not adequately trained and often he did not want to be a one. He was bound by the RCN’s victualling manual which dictated which food he could prepare. He was unable to control access to the food supplies that came onboard. Pilfering could cause him to run short. He was forced to cook for ship’s companies which increased in size over time due to changing weaponry and technologies such as radar, Asdic, and High Frequency Direction Finding (HFDF), all submarine locating devices. He had no say in the size of his galley or what was in it. A shortage of water—often turned on only three times a day in ships with boilers—meant he had to try to keep clean with tiny amounts. The men were permitted forgo shaving and to grow beards, but not the cooks, says George MacIntyre. “I was not allowed to grow a beard because of my kitchen work.”<sup>115</sup>

Weather plagued ships on convoy duty, especially those on the infamous “North Atlantic Run” from Canada and Newfoundland to ports in the UK. Fierce storms made the lives of crews miserable, and the cooks were not spared even though the galleys in the warships were normally located in the more stable part of the vessel. The more savage the storm, the more dangerous a workplace it became. Ivan McCabe pointed out that “In rough weather you had to be careful

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Walter Swereyda.

<sup>114</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 134.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre.

what you cooked.”<sup>116</sup> Even if pots were partly filled and secured with sea bars, the contents could still be thrown out, burning the unwary cook. It did not end there. The contents sloshed from one end of the galley to another, often mixing with stove oil, making footing dangerous. Doug Berry recounts what happened to a cook in *Bouctouche*. He lost his footing, fell, and slid to one end of the galley “followed by all the guck. He got up, grabbed a flat of two-and-a-half dozen eggs ... and pitched it across the galley. As the eggs slowly dripped down the bulkhead, I beat a hasty retreat.”<sup>117</sup> Fires could also break out. For example, says Jim Russell, “when cooking a roast the fat would spill over and sometimes catch fire.”<sup>118</sup> Burns, broken bones, cuts, and bruises were all part of working in a galley.<sup>119</sup> Heat was a factor when, at night, the ship was closed up and blacked out. Ivan McCabe’s coal-fired stove drove the temperature up and most of the time the cooks worked in tropical shorts and gym shoes. Charlie Appleby estimates that with the scuttles and doors dogged down, and no ventilation, the temperature could reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>120</sup> This matched wartime boiler and engine room conditions.

A newly commissioned ship—or one coming out of refit—goes through evolutions known as “workups” in order to test the machinery and the efficiency of the ship’s company. Charlie Appleby took part in *Agassiz*’s west coast workups in early 1941. The weather was not as savage as it could have been, but from the start the galley stove decided to chart a course of its own. With his assistant cook, Appleby leaped up and grabbed on to the crossbars just under the skylight, feet in the sink. Everything in the galley came loose and rolled around, while smoke belched out of the stove. There were no crossbars on the shelves to hold items there in place.<sup>121</sup> These would later have been added to the RCN’s defect list. When *Trentonian* arrived in Milford Haven, the surgeon-lieutenant, Gourlay, identified the smooth steel deck in the galley as a serious hazard for cooks “while in any sort of

<sup>116</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 135.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Doug Berry

<sup>118</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 134; Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Archie Marsh.

<sup>120</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 135.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

a sea, especially when the floor [deck] was wet or greasy.” New anti-skid flooring was installed over the bare steel deck. He did not stop there: *Trentonian* had managed to get a fan or fans installed in the galley, but he condemned them as “inadequate;” the circulation of air “insufficient;” and he argued that the galley air was “both unhealthy and unpleasant.”<sup>122</sup> George MacIntyre does not recall any ventilating fans in any of his Second World War ships.<sup>123</sup>

Action stations involved the cooks just as it did everyone else. If the cooks were preparing food when the depth charges were dropped off the quarterdeck or fired skyward says Jim Russell, then the concussion would shut off the flame on the stove or jar the tap over the sink so hard that the galley would fill with water. Or, as Charlie Appleby explained, if the klaxon signalled action stations and you were cooking or baking “goodbye cakes or whatever and run for your station.”<sup>124</sup> If the ship was closed up at action stations for a prolonged period of time, a cook would be given permission to leave his post in order to provide food and drink for the men. Cooks most often served the ship’s guns as loaders and were subject to dying like the crew. On 12 April 1941 *Windflower* and *Trillium* were escorting an eastward bound convoy when a four engine Luftwaffe Condor aircraft bombed and strafed them. The three ratings on the two pounder “Pom Pom” anti-aircraft gun came under fire and at the one on the port side, AB Donald Robertson, was wounded in his left shoulder. Cook Harry Rhoades also functioned as the SBA because he had first-aid training while working at Ogilvie’s Department Store in Montreal. A surgeon-lieutenant was brought over to *Trillium* from an RN destroyer and amputated Robertson’s left arm. Rhoades assisted but unfortunately Robertson died just as his arm was removed. Later the surgeon explained “if it hadn’t been for the calming influence of the cook [I] would have panicked a couple of times.” The ship’s gunnery officer described Rhoades as “a tower of strength before, during, and after the operation.” Rhoades was commended with a Mentioned in Despatches, an award for brave or outstanding service.<sup>125</sup> For cooks, other tasks arose, like feeding both naval and merchant

<sup>122</sup> Litwiller, *White Ensign Flying Corvette HMCS Trentonian*, 108.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre.

<sup>124</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 135.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–15; John Blatherwick, “Awards to the Royal Canadian Navy,” available: <http://www.rcnvr.com>, [last accessed: 10 December 2014].

navy survivors. As Telegraphist Carl Halstead of the corvette *Morden* reported, the ship rescued 194 men, women, and children. It fell to the cooks to feed all of them and a crew of seventy-one officers and men. They did it, the crew being fed first. “Great stew was pretty well the menu.”<sup>126</sup>

A stock breakfast food was “red lead and bacon,” bacon and hot tomatoes swimming in fat. “Square eggs” was egg powder spread out in a large pan with water or milk added, and baked. “Collision mats,” a reference to any dense material placed over a hole in the ship, were a type of thick pancake tough to chew on.<sup>127</sup> Kippered herrings might also be served for breakfast, as were very hard-boiled eggs.<sup>128</sup> Another breakfast meal might be a mush porridge with white sugar and powdered milk. “With our meals we always had tea and bread.” said Alex Shillington.<sup>129</sup> Sausages made an occasional appearance. Bern Rawle says they were “burned black on the outside but were raw on the inside.”<sup>130</sup> Anton Korbisser had something positive to say about one breakfast item “I loved red lead and bacon.” As for kippers, Armour Weir was the only non-Maritimer to tuck into them when they were served in *Oakville*.<sup>131</sup>

When meats ran out, common meals for dinner and supper were tinned goods like corned beef, “tinned afterbirth” (tinned tomatoes and stale bread), sauerkraut and wieners (“dog vomit”), and sardines; all made their way onto messdeck tables at one time or another. AB Gibb Todd was in *Regina* on route to Gibraltar to take part in Operation Torch. On the voyage out, he claims “We lived on King Oscar Sardines—a tin for breakfast, a tin for dinner, and a tin for supper. I haven’t eaten a sardine since, and never will.”<sup>132</sup> Spam/Klik also made an appearance. Stan Jones represents the majority view: “I hate Spam.” In the minority position was Stoker PO Warren Urquhart in *Port Arthur*. When the food began to run out “All the cook had

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 169–170.

<sup>127</sup> NOAC, *SD*, Vol. 5, 173–174.

<sup>128</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 138.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Alex (Shilly) Shillington, 14.

<sup>130</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 137.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Anton (“Tony”) Korbisser; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 138.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with George MacIntyre; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 139, 176.



was a five pound can of Spam. He tied it up, put a hole in the middle of it, put dressing inside, complete with raisin sauce, and he cooked it in the oven. It was good. I've always liked Spam."<sup>133</sup>

No one ever complained about "kie," a hot chocolate drink originally made specifically for the men on watch on the upper deck, particularly at night. Kie was made from large slabs of chocolate, prepared by cooks like Earl Chadwick who said that "The worst job was taking the hot kie around at night in blackouts. You carried it in a pail."<sup>134</sup> In some ships the men in the mess made it by shaving off a quantity of chocolate and then pouring boiling hot water over it. Sugar was often added.<sup>135</sup> This made the wet and the cold of the upper deck watches more bearable and, after rum, was probably the most appreciated drink available.

In most instances, the cook-of-the-mess went to the galley and picked up metal containers known as "mess fannies" and inside would be whatever was for that meal. It was supposed to feed perhaps fifteen to twenty seamen. In the older corvettes with a short fo'c'sle, the space in the bow and an extension of main deck where the men slept, socialised and ate, the cook-of-the-mess had to make it from the galley to the main door of the mess without losing the meal he was carrying. In foul weather he had to time his dash to prevent being soaked by the waves coming over the fo'c'sle, or having the fannie blown open or washed out of his hands. It was no easy task. Often the man and the food arrived soaked.<sup>136</sup> Said Jim Robinson "When I was cook-of-the-mess in *Halifax*, by the time I got the food to the forward seamen's mess, it was often covered in salt water."<sup>137</sup> Part way through the war some of these first short-fo'c'sle corvettes had the fo'c'sle extended back along the main deck, thus closing in the route from the galley to the mess, freeing men from the effects of the rain, waves, and wind. When he got the food to the mess, he spooned it out to the men there. The chiefs and *POs* had their own mess men—normally junior rates—to bring their food to their mess. Dick Vecqueray served in the minesweeper *Brockville*, and in that

<sup>133</sup> Interviews with Stan Jones and Warren (Red) Urquhart.

<sup>134</sup> Historica-Dominion Institute, *We Were Freedom*, 86; Interview with Earl Chadwick.

<sup>135</sup> Interviews with Doug Berry, George MacIntyre, and Joe ("Tug") Wilson.

<sup>136</sup> Interviews with Stan Jones and Joe ("Tug") Wilson; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 137.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Jim ("Robby") Robinson.

ship the men went up to the galley, drew their own food, and took it back to the mess. When he went to the RCN cruiser *Uganda*, the leading seaman-of-the-mess drew the food and lashed it up.<sup>138</sup> The cook-of-the-mess only had to wash up and stow everything away.

The condiments in the mess varied from ship-to-ship and often included items purchased by the men. Frank Aldred served in three destroyers and said “We were never issued pickles, marmalade, mustard, or HP Sauce or anything like that. If we wanted peanut butter, we bought it ashore and brought it back onboard.” However, Bill Wilson was also in a destroyer and he mentioned that staples in the mess were large cans of RN marmalade and tomato ketchup.<sup>139</sup> Asdic operator Joe Wilson remarked that a tin of plum jam would last a whole month “but a tin of strawberry jam would last about three days.” Messes might also carry corn syrup as sweeteners.<sup>140</sup>

Once lashed up, the ease with which the seamen ate their meal depended upon whether it was secured alongside, or if at sea the state of the sea and whether or not action stations had been sounded. Just getting enough crockery and cutlery could also be a problem. Allan Riley recalled that a December 1942 storm took its toll on the communicators’ mess in *Skeena* because the crockery had been smashed and the twenty-one men there had only enough plates for seven or eight members.<sup>141</sup> Cutlery did not fare well either. Frank Aldred said “Sometimes there was a wait for a knife and/or fork if too much silverware had gone over the side with the gash (garbage) and no one had thought to bring some from a shore restaurant.” Joe Wilson confirmed that inattention on the part of the cook-of-the-mess meant that cutlery went out the scuttle with the dish water, and that if the mess were to be properly fitted out for eating, seamen would have to steal more from shore restaurants.<sup>142</sup> The RCN was not generous with the allocation of mess fittings, explained Peter Fane, but at one point it introduced indented metal trays for ships, and these had spaces for different types of food. The trays were kept in the galley and when a seaman went there he drew one, the cooks filled it, and he took it back to the mess. When he had finished eating, he returned it to the

<sup>138</sup> Interviews with Peter Fane, Percy Boyd, and Dick Vecqueray.

<sup>139</sup> Interviews with Frank Aldred and Bill Wilson.

<sup>140</sup> Interviews with Joe (“Tug”) Wilson and Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>141</sup> Riley, *A Sparker’s War*, 63.

<sup>142</sup> Interviews with Frank Aldred and Joe (“Tug”) Wilson.

galley for cleaning. In *La Salle* these were still in use in 1945, but he is unaware whether they were tested in other ships.<sup>143</sup>

Eating in any class of ship could be difficult. Said Murray Laidlaw of *Chicoutimi*: “In rough seas, you kept one hand on the plate to be sure it stayed put while you ate, at the same time bracing yourself so that you yourself stayed put. Almost any meal could be an adventure.”<sup>144</sup> David F. Stewart commented: “You had to hang on to whatever you were drinking or eating or it would go [over] on you.”<sup>145</sup> Once spread over the mess deck table or the mess deck, that was the end of your meal. Action stations meant you left your meal where it was and raced to your assigned position where you might remain for hours on end. When you returned your meal would probably be spread out on the deck.

Negative responses to wartime cooks are not hard to locate. Cook Walter Swereyda was in a fairmile out of Prince Rupert where he met cooks from minesweepers. “They almost got tossed over the side because they couldn’t cook.” Fred Shobbrook saw the crew of a ship in Halifax throw their cook into the harbour, fling a kisby (life) ring to him, and then yell at him that the next time it would be at sea. Why? They were angry because he locked up all the tea supplies at night so that the men coming off the evening watch and the middle watch could not have a “mug up” before getting into their micks (hammocks).<sup>146</sup> Seaman Bob Small described the cook in the corvette *Dunvegan* as “filthy,” but when a friend told him not to eat one of the cook’s meals he was so hungry that he ate it anyway. The cook was drafted off and “a really clean man” was drafted onboard. Equally important for Small, he brought around kie to the men during the middle watch. Alex Braman in *Oakville* said that he had only poor memories of the food. Potatoes came in only one form, boiled, and the eggs were described as “rubber.”<sup>147</sup> Fred Dobing was in the minesweeper *Mahone* where the cook “loved to play cards. In harbour it was bad ... he grabbed a can of salmon, cut it in half, and put it on your plate—cold. We got rid of that bastard.” He believes that the ship’s company got a new cook only because the

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Peter Fane.

<sup>144</sup> O’Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 38.

<sup>145</sup> Livingston, *Oakville’s Flower*, 22.

<sup>146</sup> Interviews with Walter Swereyda and Fred Shobbrook.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Bob Small; Livingston, *Oakville’s Flower*, 22.



Leading Seaman Pat Hughes and Able Seamen Fred Derkach and Orville Campbell distributing nuts and oranges during preparations for Christmas dinner aboard the infantry landing ship H.M.C.S. *Prince David*, Ferryville, Tunisia, 25 December 1944. [Library and Archives Canada PA 142896]

officers had to eat what the ratings ate. The new cook could cook, says Dobing, but after he left *Mahone* she was rammed by a freighter off Louisburg and the cook, victualler, and SBA were all crushed to death.<sup>148</sup> Signalman Bill Howarth served in the corvette *The Pas* where the cook was unmotivated; he really wanted to be a stoker but the recruiting office told him he could change when he got to Halifax. This did not happen. “He did his best. For the officers he didn’t do his best.” *Bouctouche*’s first Cook was “temperamental” and ran a hamburger stand in Regina before joining the RCN. Said Doug Berry “He hated his job, and often showed it. He could shrink a large pork leg until it only served half the crew, and top grade beef cuts would end up in the stew.”<sup>149</sup> Jim Newby was a PO electrician in the frigate *Charlottetown (2nd)* where the cook was despised and mentioned that “He carried a great big knife in his belt at all times.”<sup>150</sup>

If seamen could point out poor cooks, there were also those seamen who, when asked about the quality of the food they ate, indicated that it was at least acceptable. Depression-era Ed Chymko

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Fred Dobing.

<sup>149</sup> Interviews with Bill Howarth and Doug Berry.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Jim Newby.

came from a family of eleven in Ituna, SK. He said “It wasn’t bad; I never complained.” Roger Nadeau was in the armed cruiser *Prince David*, and commented “The meals were not bad; they were edible.”<sup>151</sup> Leading Engine Room Artificer Lloyd A. Fairclough served in the corvette *Humberstone*, noted their cook was a character. “A great guy, [but] he never washed his socks.” His description of the man was “capable, but only as long as you gave him your rum ration and then he would make cinnamon buns [and] fresh bread.” However, “If he sobered up, forget it; the food would become hash.”<sup>152</sup> Stoker Bill St. Clair of *Port Arthur*, claims, “Our food was never bad. We never went hungry. It was never like mother’s, but it was filling.” Shipmate Bob Carson held the opinion that “Food was, I suppose, adequate to sustain life, but very crudely put up.”<sup>153</sup> Some, like Coder Al Lake in *Skeena*, saw navy food in terms of their pre-navy diet, saying “I lived through the Depression and food was scarce and I was happy with the food. I told [my messmates] they’d never had it so good.”<sup>154</sup>

Some seamen clearly understood the difficulties under which their ship’s cooks worked. Art Geizer was in *Agassiz* from 1941 to 1945, part of which time he spent as the cox’n. “I generally felt sorry for the cooks because they took verbal abuse from a lot of new entry sailors who, for the most part, had never seen salt water. They expected the same as mom cooked. Can you imagine preparing a meal while standing on a rolling deck, with pots and pans on a hot stove?” In his opinion “they did a marvellous job.”<sup>155</sup> Why were cooks not seen as competent? William H. Pugsley, said that it was because “the good ones were snapped up to be supplied free to the homes of senior officers ashore.” Doug Berry put forward the opinion that “The good cook got to stay ashore and the bad cooks went to sea.”<sup>156</sup>

Both of these views are over-simplifications. Tony Gardener’s sentiment was the most common. He had been to sea before with the British merchant navy and said simply “The cooks did their best.” Bern Rawle, a *Cobalt* stoker, knew that some cooks had been

<sup>151</sup> Interviews with Ed Chymko and Roger Nadeau.

<sup>152</sup> UVOHP, LERA Floyd A. Fairclough, Tape 1, Side B.

<sup>153</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 137.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Al Lake.

<sup>155</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 136.

<sup>156</sup> Pugsley, *Sailor Remember*, 54; Interview with Doug Berry.

recruited on the promise of being able to change their trade when they got to Halifax. This, he confirmed, did not take place, “so the poor chaps did their best but produced some pretty horrible stuff.” George Aubrey of the corvette *Sorel*, also saw that the cooks possessed little training before being sent to sea but “they did their best to supply the hunger needs of roughly a hundred men.”<sup>157</sup>

Few Canadian seamen served in the cramped, high-speed MTBs in the English Channel. Ron Rhine did and said “Our cook was pretty good considering that a) his galley was so small, b) the [British] supplies he was given were considerably less than the best, and c) he was feeding thirty-two persons (three officers) and twenty-nine others from a dinky hole-in-the-wall and one small stove.”<sup>158</sup> Corvette man Albert Baker (*Orillia*) had praise for cooks. “The cooks should get a medal of their own. There is no way they could possibly please everyone, but they did it very well under the circumstances.” Doug Murch (*Agassiz*) commented that “The cooks, I thought, were obliged to perform under incredible conditions.” Jim Simpson of the corvettes *Arvida* and *Sackville* expressed the opinion that “corvette cooks were unsung heroes.” Finally, AB Jack Scott (*Trentonian*) commented “There is no doubt in my mind that the worse job at sea [was] that of the cooks. The cooks were given very little praise for their efforts and long hours of duty.”<sup>159</sup>

There were cooks who stood out as “good” or “very good” in the minds of Canadian seamen. Sometimes they had previous experience and it shone through. John Stables served in four ships in three years and described “pusser grub” as “Pretty good.” Dick Vecqueray was in *Brockville* and praised the cook there, “Our cook was very good. He had worked with his father in the family cafe in Hamilton, Ontario.”<sup>160</sup> Another man with kitchen skills was drafted to *Lethbridge*, and, says Doug Berry, “he could cook anything well.” His pre-war job had been to cook for railroad track maintenance gangs and, “the meals were terrific. He could take leftovers from the noon meal, throw in some salt and spice, and produce delicious soup at suppertime.”<sup>161</sup> Bill

<sup>157</sup> Interview with C.S. Anthony (“Tony”) Gardener; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 134.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Ron Rhine.

<sup>159</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 136–137.

<sup>160</sup> Interviews with John Stables and Dick Vecqueray.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Doug Berry.

Howarth's first draft was *The Pas* and the ship was fortunate to have onboard a Lunenburg man who had cooked in Nova Scotian fishing schooners. Said Howarth "We had great meals. Really, really good." The Cook kept big jugs of coffee for the ship's company, "whereas most other ships had only tea. He'd crack an egg into the jug and this would pull all the grounds to the bottom." This cook did other things which improved the morale of any seaman who stood watches on the upper deck, like Signalman Howarth, because "After a watch on the bridge he'd allow you to put your mittens on a rack behind the stove to dry them out." And here was the key: "He knew what sailors wanted and needed."<sup>162</sup> In order to win the support and approval of the crew, inexperienced cooks had to learn to cater as best they could to these wants and needs. Thus, their attitude became crucial. Eric Jensen was one of these: "I was really eager to cook. I was enjoying every minute of it."<sup>163</sup>

Evaldo Bridaroli was in the *Algonquin* and he had no complaints, saying "Actually, the food was quite good and the cooks were very amiable."<sup>164</sup> Jim Robinson commented that "The navy cooks did a pretty good job." And then added, "We got [fresh] bread from time to time." Jack Aldred felt that the quality of pusser grub was very good and he, too, mentioned bread made in the ship. Furthermore, "We must have had efficient cooks and supply officers because we ate good." Larry Neuman served in the frigate *Kokanee* where "The meals were good. In the Atlantic I ate well."<sup>165</sup> After eating the food prepared by a poor cook in *Mahone*, Fred Dobing was drafted to another corvette, *Parry Sound*, where he described the cook as good because he could supply the men with good bread.<sup>166</sup> In the opinion of Jim Brown, serving as a gunner in the frigate *Monnow*, "Our food, as far as I'm concerned, was perfect."<sup>167</sup> Another factor was the quality of a man's life during the Great Depression. Reg Martin spent two years in the seagoing salvage tug *Norton*, roving the North Atlantic coast line on various assignments, including forays far out to sea to

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Bill Howarth.

<sup>163</sup> Historica-Dominion Institute, *We Were Freedom*, 86.

<sup>164</sup> Questionnaire completed by Evaldo Bridaroli.

<sup>165</sup> Questionnaire completed by Jack ("Bubbles") Aldred; Interviews with Jim ("Robby") Robinson and Larry Neuman; Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 137-138.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Fred Dobing.

<sup>167</sup> Historica-Dominion Institute, *We Were Freedom*, 50.

rescue damaged or disabled freighters and warships. Of the vessel's cook he said, "He was as good as they come. You were lucky to have something to eat after the Depression."<sup>168</sup>

Tributes like this at least matched the number of complaints about RCN wartime cooks. The names of cooks are now largely lost to the memories of veterans of Canada's Second World War navy, but some survive. Cook Jim Russell voiced an opinion that many small ship cooks probably shared, "The officers and crew all got the same meals, so you caught hell in all directions."<sup>169</sup> Some of the names were remembered and the men praised these cooks as being outstanding at their jobs. Fred Shobbrook's first draft was *Malaspina*. The captain and cook came from the Department of Fisheries. Shobbrook described him as a good cook and Stoker Bill Carnes referred to him as follows: "His name was Barnes and he was a hell of a good man."<sup>170</sup> Jack Russell in *Oakville* expressed his opinion stating "One thing is that the food was good and there was always lots of it." This he said was because of the ship's cooks, P.J. McKeown and his assistant cook, Richard Middleton. Further, while on the Triangle Run, *Oakville* was kept filled with fresh rations, giving the ship's company three good and varied meals a day, "all good and hot." In addition, there was plenty of coffee, toast, and jam available.<sup>171</sup> In the corvette *Quesnel*, Stanley Noble remembers a cook from Winnipeg named St. Pierre who "used to make the most beautiful flap jacks I've ever eaten. My goodness they were good. I just loved them." But what was the genesis of the flapjacks? "My wife-to-be would send me tins of chicken and he'd make us this chicken dinner. In return he'd make me these flapjacks."<sup>172</sup> *Chicoutimi*, recalls Murray Laidlaw, was fortunate to have Vic Lohnes from Lunenburg who had prewar experience in fishing schooners, "so we were lucky in that we always seemed to have a hot meal, regardless of heavy weather." His seagoing experience taught him [Lohnes] to start boiling the potatoes about three hours before the meal, all the while topping up the water several times, "so that every time the ship took a hard roll clouds

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Reg Martin.

<sup>169</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 135.

<sup>170</sup> Interviews with Fred Shobbrook and Bill Carnes.

<sup>171</sup> Livingston, *Oakville's Flower*, 22.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Stanley ("Stosh") Noble.





Sailors having dinner in the seamen's mess, H.M.C.S. *Kamsack*, Aug 1942. [Library and Archives Canada PA 170292]

of steam came up out of the galley skylight.”<sup>173</sup> Ivan McCabe was complimented by W. Leo Johnson for his cooking in *Orangeville* who said “We had an excellent cook, which makes for a happy ship. Ivan McCabe became a restaurateur in Regina.” *Orangeville's* co, Rodney Pike, agreed as seen from one of his diary entries, “We are having fried chicken for supper ... The Cooks have done damned well cooking it when the ship has been so active.”<sup>174</sup> Fairmile Q-072 was fortunate to have Cook Paul Adourian of Dunnville, Ontario. He had previous restaurant experience in a family setting. He was also his own victualler, and when he went ashore in Saint John he came back with more than just tinned goods for what Harry Barrett described as, “mouth-watering meals for all hands.” Adourian was “a born wheeler-dealer” and he managed to get the ship's company more than the allotted number of eggs and amount of bacon. But he was unable to stop the Thursday delivery of the alleged joint

<sup>173</sup> O'Connor, *The Corvette Years*, 49.

<sup>174</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 136; RAM, Hol. 142.1g., Diary of Rodney A. Pike, 29 December 1944.

of lamb, which Ontario farm boy Barrett suspected was really “tolerably good mutton” at the very best of times, and probably an old ram. Adourain’s family was originally Syrian and he knew how to prepare mutton such that Barrett gushed “I have never tasted such well-prepared mutton ... until I joined Q-72.” Barrett and Adourain usually had the meal all to themselves.<sup>175</sup>

Was the health of Canadian seamen ever compromised by their diet? Doug Berry saw this as being the case when *Bouctouche* was making the run to Iceland in 1941, as did the RCN, and the men’s RN-dictated diet was altered. John Stables was in fairmile Q-86 out of Saint John. His CO, a lieutenant, had an ulcer and the MO ashore said that the fried food was making it worse. Said Stables “We had a great cook. He fried just about everything.” However, shortly thereafter, Stables had his own stomach problems and went to the same MO, who arranged a draft to the minesweeper *Westmount*. His health improved immediately.<sup>176</sup> Stoker Morley Barnes in the corvette *Kincardine* claimed that he and others in the ship developed scurvy because of the shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables. He said that he developed swelling of the joints and sores appeared, which later left a mark on his body.<sup>177</sup> More of a problem for some men was that they had good cooks onboard and that the easy access to food in their ships resulted in weight gain. Anton Korbisser, just one of several men who gained weight, said “I ate everything they cooked.” Moreover, “I was 115 [pounds] when I joined. I came out at 130 pounds.”<sup>178</sup>

The RCN recognised the service rendered by a few men in both trades. From the above it can be seen that there were men deserving of commendations. However, service had to be recognised by the appropriate authority who was willing to champion your cause, if it was to receive a hearing. Even then a commendation was not guaranteed. The most common award for brave or outstanding service, usually at sea, was the Mentioned in Despatches (MID). The symbol was a single bronze oak leaf which was worn on the ribbon of the Canadian General Service Medal (CGSM). It was the RCN’s recognition of the attention a seaman had given to his trade. Amongst

<sup>175</sup> Harry B. Barrett, *The Navy and Me* (Port Dover, ON: Patterson’s Creek Press, 2003), 202.

<sup>176</sup> Interviews with Doug Berry and John Stables.

<sup>177</sup> Johnston, *Corvettes Canada Convoy Veterans of WWII Tell Their True Stories*, 133.

<sup>178</sup> Interviews with Anton (“Tony”) Korbisser, Paul Balash, and Alf Connelly.

those in supply was Daniel J. Hanley a leading supply rate. He was cited as being “exceptionally efficient in carrying out his duties at sea.” Furthermore, “His cheerfulness and his excellent supervision of his department, have provided a fine spirit of cooperation among his shipmates, and have contributed greatly to the efficiency of his ship.” A young Francophone leading supply assistant named Joseph D.H. Laine was also awarded an MID. He is described as “energetic and reliable” and a man whose promotion had been slowed only by his limited knowledge of English. “He has worked hard for the well-being of the ship’s company by being unstinting of his time and efforts.” He was recognised as being a man of a “cheerful nature” and his storerooms were seen as “models of efficiency and cleanliness.” Chief supply rate Donald G. Mitton was awarded a British Empire Medal (BEM). This award was also for meritorious service or acts of gallantry not in the face of the enemy. His citation read that he gave “invaluable service in supervising the efficient provisioning of ships leaving port, which [was] so essential to the maintenance of the seagoing personnel.” His service was marked by “the utmost zeal, cheerfulness and praise-worthy devotion to duty.”<sup>179</sup>

The ship’s cooks were not forgotten; MIDS were awarded to them as well. Cook Fred Zelinsky had assisted with the commissioning of the fairmile Q-104 at Weymouth in August 1941, “one of the first Motor Launches [fairmiles] built in Canada.” His three years of service in the RCN were recognised with the words “exceptional ability and outstanding devotion to duty, being always an inspiration to others by his capable and cheerful manner in carrying out his duties, frequently of long hours’ duration.” John S. Adam, an A/leading cook did not go unnoticed and he was commended for “consistent devotion to duty in all types of weather for nearly three years” in the corvettes *Arvida* and *Dauphin*. “His cheerfulness and willingness have done much for the general health and well-being of the ship’s company.” Leading Cook Edwin F. Tamblin is cited for his “continuous devotion to duty and exemplary service afloat” as well as his “constant cheerfulness and skill, under the most trying conditions.” These qualities, says the citation, “have done much to further the health and well-being of the ship’s company.”<sup>180</sup> BEMS were also awarded to

<sup>179</sup> Blatherwick, “Awards to the Royal Canadian Navy.” [last accessed: 10 December 2014].

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

cooks. Bob Childs in the *Saskatchewan* was a baker by profession who was awarded the BEM in 1944 “for his outstanding contributions to the ship’s morale.”<sup>181</sup> His award stated that Childs’ actions “at all times have been an inspiration and stimulus to all with who he came into contact.”<sup>182</sup> As the war drew to a close it became evident that the quality of a ship’s cook’s training was improving, in part due to the efforts of Chief Cook (S) Ross D. Eisen. His BEM notes he rendered “excellent service over a long period, particularly in the important task of training new cooks for general service [S].” The RCN observed that in training male ratings and Wrens, “the majority of whom had no previous cooking experience,” he displayed “patience, industry and tact at all times.” This the navy applauded because, “His efforts are believed to have assisted greatly in the rapidly improving standard of cooking in the Service.”<sup>183</sup>

While there are those former Second World War seamen who, based on their own particular experiences of being fed at sea, would agree with Tom MacIntyre in his assessment of “pusser grub,” there were those who did not. Not surprisingly, the level of satisfaction with navy food and the manner in which it was cooked ran the full gamut. By paying no attention to the desires of some of the recruits, the navy placed some unmotivated men into the cook trade, and early on provided them with inadequate training, thereby setting them up for failure. Further, the quantity of food was often inadequate, even after the reforms of 1942. The victualler had to acquire the food and then protect it as best he could from pilfering, the weather, and a lack of equipment to preserve it. It proved difficult for a cook to produce high-quality dishes with low-quality ingredients. Even the best chef cannot turn rotten eggs into a good omelette. Moreover, the task of feeding men at sea, especially in vessels like corvettes and minesweepers which were never meant to make lengthy voyages on the high seas and with primitive galleys, was not an easy one. Clearly, going to sea in the wartime RCN as a victualler or a cook was not for the faint of heart nor the thin-skinned. All that remained to sour the men on “pusser grub” was the struggle to get it to their mess

<sup>181</sup> NOAC, *SD*, Vol. 5, 173–174.

<sup>182</sup> Blatherwick, “Awards to the Royal Canadian Navy.” [last accessed: 10 December 2014].

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

in all types of weather, and then to keep it on the mess table long enough to get it down.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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