

remarkable man, with singular responsibility at a pivotal moment of naval construction history, is a tribute owing to the editor, Ian Buxton. This will be an important reference for naval technical historians delving into this era.

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Grant, John H. *The Mystery Ships of Nova Scotia in the First World War: Q-Ships vs U-Boats in 1917*

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Sometimes it is the minutiae of history that can hold the greatest interest. In what might barely pass as a footnote in a larger story, revealing details may well be found. Such is the case with John N. Grant's brief volume on the Q-ships of Nova Scotia in the Great War. This is a genuinely forgotten story for many reasons. On one level there is a fascination with the Q-ships, a topic which has seen a steady series of volumes which began in the 1920s and continues today. The use of seemingly unarmed steamers and sailing vessels as decoy vessels to lure U-boats to the surface and entice them to come within range of hidden guns aboard holds its own interest. The British Admiralty used upwards of 200 vessels in this clandestine service; it lost some 27 of them with only 14 confirmed U-boat sinkings. However, none of the volumes on the subject, to the best of my knowledge, mentions the fact that there is a Canadian component to the story.

Grant is a Nova Scotia educator with a number of local history volumes to his credit, and *The Mystery Ships* is a credit to his research skills. The volume is well-researched and footnoted and contains an impressive bibliography of volumes on Q-ships, the naval history of Canada during the period of the First World War, and local history of many of the Nova Scotia ports.

The problems of researching the story are compounded by the fact that the tiny fleet of fishing Q-ships, in spite of the fact that it operated in the coastal waters of Atlantic Canada, appears to have little, if anything, to do with the Royal Canadian Navy, but was an appendage of the Special Services Branch of the British Admiralty. The idea of Q-ships was one of the attempts to address the threat of U-boats to the sea commerce supporting Great Britain. These decoy vessels had achieved some successes in 1915 and early 1916 and, with the increased range of the German submarines and the resumption of

unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, the threat to vessels in the western Atlantic was believed to be a real one.

As a result, the British Admiralty established a collection of six Canadian-registered Grand Banks fishing schooners (hardly a fleet) to be used as decoy vessels in Canadian waters. The move was based on the belief that Germany's U-boats would find the coastal vessels and Grand Banks schooners to be an attractive target, which, although not worth an expensive and scarce torpedo, would still represent an opportunity to strike a blow and draw fire from the submarine's deck guns. The six schooners were purchased through Halifax businessman C.W. Ackhurst and Edward Aemilius Jarvis of Toronto. Jarvis was no stranger to ownership stratagems, having been previously used by the Canadian government to acquire a number of private American-owned yachts to be converted into naval patrol vessels. The schooners, almost all of which were under 100 feet, were remodeled to carry a 12-pound Armstrong Whitworth gun hidden by painted screens showing stacked dories. The vessels were under the command of civilian captains. The mates were British naval officers, and crews were largely Newfoundland Royal Naval Reservists. In the case of encounter with the enemy, the Royal Navy mates took command while in action. The disguised vessels operated out of St. John's, Newfoundland, and Sydney, Nova Scotia, and were under the control of the senior naval officer in Newfoundland. In spite of a period of outfitting and training, the experiment lasted for only five months in the summer and fall of 1917. During the period of their service not a single encounter with a U-boat took place, and the experiment was brought to a close. It was a lack of opportunity rather than defectiveness in the plan that caused the lack of action. There were simply no U-boats in the area that year. Although 1918 saw considerable U-boat activity on the American and Canadian Atlantic coast, by that time the effectiveness of the convoy system had begun to prove itself and the deterrent factor of the Q-ships had been discounted.

This could not have been an easy subject to research. Missing from most conventional naval histories, falling between command responsibilities, and without tangible results, the history of the Q-ships does not have a deep documentary trail. Grant has sifted through archival records and relied on passing references in other texts, community histories, and personal recollections to uncover this intriguing story. While on the surface this hardly seems to be a riveting tale, *The Mystery Ships* turns out to be a fascinating story that, without Grant's interest and research, would surely be forgotten.

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