

“The Best VR in the Whole Flaming Navy”: The Life and Career of Lieutenant Commander Clifton R. “Tony” Coughlin

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Lieutenant Commander Clifton R. “Tony” Coughlin, DSC, was one of the most successful Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) officers of the Second World War. This article examines his life and career, drawing primarily on the 800 letters he wrote to his wife Martha Coughlin from war’s outbreak until his death in 1944. It provides insight into many of the key characters of the wartime Royal Canadian Navy, the day-to-day experience of RCNVR officers, and the character of a brilliant, and largely forgotten, leader. Coughlin was candid and observant. By the time of his death, he was well on his way to becoming, as he always hoped, “the best VR in the whole flaming navy.”

Le capitaine de corvette Clifton R. « Tony » Coughlin, D.S.C., était l’un des meilleurs officiers de la Réserve des volontaires de la Marine royale canadienne (RVMRC) de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cet article, qui traite de sa vie et de sa carrière, s’appuie principalement sur les 800 lettres qu’il a écrites à sa femme Martha Coughlin depuis le déclenchement de la guerre jusqu’à sa mort en 1944. Il donne un aperçu de bon nombre des personnages clés de la Marine royale canadienne en temps de guerre, des expériences quotidiennes des officiers de la RVMRC et du caractère d’un chef exceptionnel en grande partie oublié. Coughlin était franc et bon observateur. Au moment de sa mort, il était sur le point de devenir, comme il l’avait toujours espéré, « le meilleur réserviste volontaire de la marine entière ».

Lieutenant Commander Clifton Rexford “Tony” Coughlin was commissioned into the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) as a lieutenant in January 1940. Nearly five years later, after a rapid rise that won him a Distinguished Service Cross, respect from some of the RCN’s most prominent sailors, and status as one of only three fully qualified Volunteer Reserve (pre-war civilians) lieutenant commanders in the entire navy, he seemed poised to figure prominently as the RCN concluded its European operations in the Second World War. Instead, on 19 October 1944, Tony died of injuries sustained at sea. His story, deeply enmeshed with the careers of Canada’s most distinguished sailors and the RCN’s transformation into a “Blue Water Navy,” has been largely forgotten. While his voice is silent in the historical record, Tony was far from quiet in life. From the outbreak of war to his death, across two navies, four ships, and three shore establishments, Tony wrote constantly to his wife Martha Coughlin, commenting candidly, broadly, and perceptively on his service, relationships, and career. Except for autumn, winter, and spring of 1942-1943, when the couple was together, nearly every letter Tony wrote from each period of his service has survived.¹ This article constitutes the first scholarly analysis of those letters, supplemented by naval archival materials, newspaper articles, historians’ accounts of the period, and Coughlin’s service record. It is the first full picture of the man who wanted to be – and was well on his way to becoming – “the best VR in the whole flaming navy.”² Indeed, for the rest of her life, Martha would always insist that “Tony was going to be an admiral,” and his career trajectory demonstrated that she was not alone in that opinion.³

The significance of Martha’s prediction is apparent in how few Second World War RCNVR officers went on to achieve the rank. The RCNVR, colloquially known as the “Wavy Navy” due to the wavy stripes on its officers’ sleeves, contributed the majority of the RCN’s officers and enlisted personnel – including the members of the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service – throughout the Second World War. Originally established in the 1920s as a

¹ The more than 800 letters in the collection remained in the possession of Tony’s widow, Martha Coughlin, until her death in 2008. After her death, they were given to her nephew, Roger Dent, and remained in his possession until the start of this investigation. The letters have, to the author’s knowledge, never been read by any historians since their writing. They span from 1936 to 1944, featuring the letterhead of the Queen’s University Arts Society, of which Tony was secretary and then president, Jones Heward & Company, where he worked in Montreal, and the various ships and shore establishments where he served in the Second World War. Once he went to sea, nearly all were numbered and dated.

² Clifton Rexford Coughlin (CRC) to Martha Hazel Coughlin (MHC), Letter R10, Sunday 21 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

³ Theresa Dent, phone interview with the author, May 2021.

vehicle to generate enthusiasm for the navy in landlocked cities, the RCNVR's divisions were training centers for citizen sailors who attended thirty nights of training a year, two weeks of sustained training at the RCN's main bases at Halifax, Nova Scotia or Esquimalt, British Columbia, and remained on standby for service when needed. Otherwise, the VRs were little different from their fellow civilians – while many VRs had an interest in sailing, many others had never seen the sea. Despite this inexperience and the limited training facilities they had available, in September 1939 VR officers and men joined the RCN's regular force and the civilian professional sailors of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve in responding to Canada's call to arms. By the middle of the war, VR officers were in command of their own ships, drawing praise for their leadership, skill, and intelligence, albeit alongside some grumbling regarding their inexperience at sea and with naval traditions. Meanwhile, the tens of thousands of VR sailors recruited from coast to coast during the war – all civilians – were living proof that the RCN truly was a people's navy.

The VRs appear in nearly all Second World War Canadian naval scholarship by virtue of their predominance in the wartime service, but there is much less on VRs as a group or as individuals. Fraser McKee's *Volunteers for Sea Service* is not as substantial as the subject warrants, nor are the chapters dealing with VRs in larger works.⁴ The best overview of the subject is *Citizen Sailors: Chronicles of Canada's Naval Reserve* edited by Richard H. Gimblett and Michael L. Hadley,⁵ which covers the RCNVR's history from its inception to the modern era and includes Richard Mayne's important chapter on the 1939-1945 period. Published personal accounts of the VRs in the Second World War are also brief, with Hal Lawrence's *A Bloody War*⁶ perhaps the only book-length memoir by a RCNVR officer.

The present article tells the RCNVR's story through one officer's eyes,

⁴ Fraser McKee, *Volunteers for Sea Service: A Brief History of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, Its Predecessors and Successors on Its 50th Anniversary, 1973* (n.p.: Houstons Standard Publications, 1973).

⁵ Richard H. Gimblett and Michael L. Hadley, eds., *Citizen Sailors: Chronicles of Canada's Naval Reserve 1910-2010* (Toronto: Dundurn Press in co-operation with the Department of National Defence, 2010).

⁶ Hal Lawrence, *A Bloody War: One Man's Memories of the Canadian Navy, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1979). *The Corvette Navy: True Stories from Canada's Atlantic War* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977) and *On the Triangle Run* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1986) by James Lamb draw on his experience as a wartime RCNVR officer. The Naval Association of Canada published oral history interviews with several wartime RCNVR officers in the early volumes of their series “Salty Dips,” especially volumes 1-3 (Ottawa: Ottawa Branch, Naval Officers' Association of Canada, 1983-1988). Mac Johnston gathered memories of RCNVR personnel of all ranks for *Corvettes Canada: Convoy Veterans of World War II Tell Their True Stories* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley and Sons Canada, 2008).



Tony Coughlin. (Coughlin Papers)

Tony Coughlin, from the first days of training to the inferno of naval combat. In doing so, it cannot compare with the breadth of other scholarly efforts, but Coughlin's detailed reporting in his nearly daily correspondence through all but a few months of his wartime career provides an eyewitness view of unique precision and intensity.

Tony Coughlin was born on 14 April 1913, in Bryson, Quebec. He attended Lisgar Collegiate Institute where he met Martha Dent, with whom he soon started the relationship that would help define his adult life.⁷ In 1933, Tony left Ottawa to study commerce at Queen's University as a member of the Class of 1937. Upon graduation, he moved to Montreal, simultaneously studying for his Master of Commerce from McGill University and working as a statistician at the investment firm Jones Heward & Company, which he joined full time after the completion of his master's degree in 1939. Except for a brief spell in 1937, it seems that Martha and Tony – engaged in 1932 – never lived in the

⁷ Martha Hazel Coughlin, née Dent, was born in 1913 in Ottawa, Ontario. Awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree from Carleton University, Martha's twenty-eight years working with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company began before Tony left for war.

Tony Coughlin and Martha Dent, prior to their marriage and the outbreak of war.
(Coughlin Papers)



same place from his departure for Queen’s to the outbreak of the Second World War.

In a 15 September 1937 letter to Martha, Tony mused: “I wonder what will come of all the trouble in China and Europe. Only time will tell I guess.”⁸ With a nod to the trouble in Europe and perhaps with another to having been in the sea cadets in the 1920s, he applied at the Montreal Division for the RCNVR Supplementary Reserve in the spring of 1939, and was accepted on the recommendation of the division’s commanding officer, Commander Ernest R. Brock.⁹ This new mode of entry into the service was open to those

⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter PW1, 15 September 1937, Coughlin Papers.

⁹ The first reserve naval officer to attain the rank of commodore, Brock joined the RN in 1916, and was transferred to the RCN in 1923. First serving in RCN ships, including HMCS *Champlain* and *Saguenay*, in 1934 Brock began serving as the commanding officer of the Montreal Division of the RCNVR. Promoted to commander in 1937, Brock would serve in senior administrative posts throughout the war, including as commanding officer Reserve Divisions from 1945 until his demobilization in 1946. Tony rarely mentioned his cadet service in his letters, except for CRC to MHC, Letter T24, January 1940, Coughlin Papers. Tony’s supplementary reserve enrolment dates to 25 March 1939, in Royal Canadian Navy, *The Navy*

who could not attend training due to their location or work obligations. These volunteers were potential officers, but would not be commissioned and given a rank until they came out for active service following the outbreak of war. Louis Audette, who would also become a distinguished ship commander during the war, joined the Supplementary Reserve at the Montreal Division around the same time as Tony.¹⁰

While we do not have Tony's letters at the outbreak of war, as he had travelled home to Ottawa for Labour Day, we know that the news had an impact: he and Martha abandoned plans to marry in 1940 and instead wed on 21 September.¹¹ Back in Montreal in the last months of 1939, Tony waited for word from the navy about what rank he would receive when he was commissioned. Initially worried he would be a sub-lieutenant, Tony's five years as a cadet, holding of two university degrees, and perhaps the positive impressions he had already made as a Supplementary Reservist ensured his commission as a lieutenant. They also helped ensure his success in the months between his attestation and his first appointment. In these cold winter days, he worked at Jones Heward & Company each day and trained with the RCNVR nearly every night, overseeing new recruits before they went to further training. Soon, however, it was time for his own training. In March 1940, Tony left Montreal, joining the second class of officers trained at HMCS *Stone Frigate* in Kingston, Ontario.¹²

Tony arrived there on Sunday, 3 March 1940. His initial reactions were

List, November 1939. Although there are no naval records of Tony's pre-1939 involvement, Tony indicated to Martha he had been studying morse code in late 1937, in CRC to MHC, November 1937, Letter T7, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰ Audette, who had practiced law with the firm of Audette & O'Brien before the war, joined the RCNVR about six months prior to Tony. Serving in the destroyer HMCS *Saguenay*, Audette spent time thereafter in extensive training in gunnery and navigational duties, before taking command of the corvette HMCS *Amherst* from September 1942 to May 1944 as an acting lieutenant commander. Promoted to full lieutenant commander in January 1945 – after Tony – Audette would spend the remainder of his war commanding the frigates HMCS *Coaticook* and *St. Catharines*. Promoted to the rank of commander as a reservist after the war, Audette would gain fame in naval circles most for his leading role in the 1949 Commission of Inquiry into the RCN, also known as the "Mainguy Commission," which investigated, among other things, the sources of tension between the lower decks and the RCN's officers during its postwar retrenchment. A member of the Order of Canada, Audette would remain a respected figure in naval circles until and after his death in 1995.

¹¹ Having given no indication they would be married in letters before his departure, one can only imagine the conversations, decisions, and mayhem that involved getting married almost exactly three weeks after Tony arrived back in Ottawa. They spent their honeymoon in New York City.

¹² *Stone Frigate* was a provisional training establishment in the Royal Military College, which trained three classes of officers before larger establishments could be organized.

that the 06:45 wakeup time “isn’t bad,” pleasant surprise at the cocoa “which all the boys take advantage of,” “very good” meals, and, most important, that “I should know a good bit more when I leave here.”¹³ His instruction at *Stone Frigate* was wide ranging, including signals, seamanship, navigation, pilotage, explosions and gas, marching manoeuvres, squad drills, and the operation of both Lewis and Bren guns.¹⁴ The course was comprehensive, but extremely abbreviated, attempting only to give, as William Glover describes, “classroom instruction to a basic officer-of-the-watch level.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, the *Stone Frigate* course included very limited training at sea – as Tony remarked, “the only thing we seem to do here is take notes.”¹⁶

Throughout his time in *Stone Frigate*, Tony would demonstrate his work ethic, leadership skills, and confidence that built on his prior experience to ensure his success. Tony recognized that he was further ahead than the majority (despite his weekly trips to see Martha in Ottawa), and wished in vain for a lock on his door to stop the streams of men asking for help.¹⁷ Tony would comment weeks into his time in Kingston that he had not found anything difficult yet and that he felt well prepared for nearly every assessment, notwithstanding his disappointment at coming only second in the class on a navigation test.¹⁸ As he said of leading a squad drill, “think I did quite well – but then I would. At least I shouted loud enough and didn’t get ‘hailed-up’ as most of the lads did.”¹⁹ Tony passed out of *Stone Frigate* tied for first place in the class with another RCNVR officer, who he would get to know much better in Halifax – St. Clair Balfour.²⁰ In May 1940, Tony travelled to Halifax for more training in torpedo,

¹³ CRC to MHC, 4 March 1940, Letter T26, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁴ Extensive descriptions are available in William R. Glover, “Officer Training and the Quest for Operational Efficiency in the Royal Canadian Navy, 1939-1945” (PhD diss., University of London, 1998), 40.

¹⁵ Glover, “Officer Training and the Quest,” 36.

¹⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter T29, March 1940, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁷ On his trips to Ottawa, see CRC to MHC, Letter T57, April 1940, Coughlin Papers. On the men asking for help, CRC to MHC, Letter T59, April 1940, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁸ On assessments, CRC to MHC, Letter T38, March 1940, Coughlin Papers. On his disappointment, CRC to MHC, Letter T41, March 1940, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter T41, March 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²⁰ CRC to MHC, Letter T71, May 1940, Coughlin Papers. St. Clair Balfour III, born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1910, received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto in 1931. Balfour initially worked at the *Hamilton Spectator*, a newspaper owned by the Southam family with whom Tony was very close (indeed it is quite possible both Tony and Balfour knew the Southams separately before the war, Tony likely through Martha). Balfour’s naval career presents a window into what Tony’s may have been had he stayed on as a gunnery instructor. Placed in charge of the Gunnery School in Halifax in 1941, Balfour then served in the destroyer HMCS *St. Laurent* as its gunnery officer. Returning to shore to command the gunnery school in St. John’s in 1942, he was selected for the RCN’s Command Course in 1943 (he was not in

gunnery, and at sea, as the RCN prepared its officers to lead the vital escorts of merchant ships supplying Britain against the expanding German threat. Indeed, as Tony settled into Halifax, the first German tanks rolled into France.

One of the first frustrations Tony had on his arrival in Halifax was postal censorship, complaining “there is practically nothing we are able to write about.”²¹ Worse, Tony’s boredom in his off-hours in Kingston was not resolved in Halifax. “I don’t think this is such a hot town,” he wrote in his second letter after arriving, and often lamented that he did not have anything to do – a problem only worsened by his inability to see Martha.²²

In Halifax, Tony would reconnect with several men from Ottawa, Montreal, and Queen’s who would all become notable officers and figure prominently in Tony’s navy life. First was Barry O’Brien,²³ another Ottawa man, who was one of Tony’s closest friends. Tony and Barry spent a good deal of time with Gordie Southam, grandson of publishing magnate William Southam, whose Southam Inc. newspaper conglomerate would eventually be chaired by the fourth member of their quadrumvirate, St. Clair Balfour. These four officers, of whom it seems Tony was professionally closest with Balfour, but personally closest with O’Brien, often saw shows and dined together, and sometimes relaxed or enjoyed oysters at the wealthy Balfour’s suites in the Lord Nelson hotel.

In Halifax, Tony’s potential was already being noticed, as he was

Tony’s class, the first). Upon his graduation and promotion to Lt. Cdr., Balfour commanded the corvette HMCS *Lethbridge* and frigate HMCS *Meon* through 1944, eventually promoted to Acting Commander. Taking command of the frigate HMCS *Dunver* as the senior officer of the 27th Escort Group in 1945, Balfour would end his war as executive officer of HMCS *Cornwallis*, the RCN’s largest training facility, holding a Distinguished Service Cross. He is most famous, however, for his career after the war as the eventual President and Chairman of Southam Press Limited – started by the Southam family he and Tony were so close to – where he became one of the most prominent newspaper publishers in Canada. Balfour died in 2002.

²¹ CRC to MHC, Letter T67, May 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²² CRC to MHC, Letter T68, May 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²³ After service on the corvette HMCS *Trillium*, O’Brien commanded the corvette HMCS *Snowberry* from May 1943 to January 1944, before being promoted to Acting Lt. Cdr. and taking command of the corvette HMCS *Long Branch*. He retired as a full lieutenant commander in October 1945. O’Brien was Mentioned in Despatches in June 1944, with the following citation: “For outstanding cheerfulness and devotion to duty, whilst serving as an Officer in His Majesty’s Canadian Corvettes on escort duty in the North Atlantic since September, 1940; Lieutenant O’Brien has at all times displayed the highest degree of initiative, energy and resourcefulness in encounters with the enemy. When promoted to command (HMCS *Snowberry*), his superior qualities of leadership, tact, and unflinching good humour resulted in his having one of the happiest and most efficient ships in the Newfoundland Command.”

Surg. Capt. John Blatherwick, “Royal Canadian Navy Citations WW2,” in *Canadian Orders, Decorations, and Medals*, 6th Ed., <https://www.blatherwick.net/documents/Royal%20Canadian%20Navy%20Citations/O%20-%20RCN%20-%20WW2.pdf>.

delayed in taking a torpedo course to carry out a special assignment that is not specifically described in either the letters or Tony's service record.²⁴ On completing his training, he was selected to become an instructor, which he viewed as "good experience at handling men."²⁵ In charge of fifty ratings, and as one of only six officers chosen, Tony immediately thought that it "might lead to something good later on." After his first interactions with the group, he remarked, "they could have been worse."²⁶ Around the same time, Tony took on another assignment as a liaison officer to the Dutch naval officers in Halifax coordinating the defence of the Dutch West Indies, which he found very interesting, and led him to know the Dutch "the best of anyone here."²⁷ This period saw Tony beginning to "feel like an old veteran," laughing at stories about impossibly quick promotions to "big ships" that Martha passed along from Ottawa.²⁸

On 1 September, as the first RCN destroyers on convoy duty in the Atlantic struggled to counter German wolfpack tactics, Tony began a "long" gunnery course, alongside a few handpicked classmates. Tony was excited, telling Martha, "It is quite a grind but when you are finished you really have something."²⁹ Tony's notes piled up "fast and furious," and from exams on rangefinders to "practically everything in the Royal Naval Field Training handbook's 300-odd pages," the course was extensive.³⁰ Tony liked the challenge: "really feel great these days. Hard work agrees with me."³¹ His results, as usual, were excellent. He placed first in the class, comfortably ahead of Balfour who placed second.³²

Finishing the long "G" course, Tony was understandably optimistic about his progress. He hoped to go to sea but was instead among the four top graduates chosen to instruct at the gunnery school. On his first day in the new role, Tony lamented, "I must say, we have a job on our hands."³³ He reported spending most of his time yelling at his pupils, whether "blasting" those doing

²⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter T76, May 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter T103, June 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter T86, June 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter T125 & Letter T140, July 1940, Coughlin Papers. It is possible – although far from certain – that this was the job that Tony could not mention to Martha in May, perhaps declassified between May and July.

²⁸ On feeling like an old veteran, CRC to MHC, Letter T114, July 1940, Coughlin Papers. On the stories from Ottawa, CRC to MHC, Letter T127, August 1940, Coughlin Papers.

²⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter T140, August 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³⁰ CRC to MHC, Letter T158, September 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³¹ CRC to MHC, Letter T143, September 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³² CRC to MHC, Letter T175, October 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³³ CRC to MHC, Letter T176, October 1940, Coughlin Papers.

something wrong or simply trying to shout over the sound of the guns.³⁴ Yet he found the work enabled him to apply what he had learned in his studies and kept him busy enough. When Tony returned to Halifax in late December after two weeks of leave, he learned that he was slated to go to sea in the River-class destroyer HMCS *Assiniboine*, joining the RCN's struggle to maintain supply lines to perilously isolated Britain.

Assiniboine was built by the Royal Navy in 1931, initially commissioned as HMS *Kempfenfelt* before being transferred into the RCN in 1939. Capable of a top speed of thirty-one knots, *Assiniboine* was 329 feet long with a complement of 171 crew members and ten officers. The ship was built almost exclusively for surface combat, featuring four 4.7-inch guns and eight 21-inch torpedo tubes, although soon after Tony joined two of the guns and four of the torpedo tubes were removed to allow the ship to carry more depth charges and additional light anti-aircraft guns. After a visit by Martha for a few days in January, Tony embarked on the destroyer. His time in training – for the time being – was over.

Tony's first impressions of *Assiniboine* were positive and perhaps slightly awed. After his first day on his new ship, Tony told Martha:

Well today has naturally been a little different from the usual since I joined my ship this morning. It is all very interesting although I shall have a lot to do and to learn. . . . It really is a fine ship and the lads aboard are all very nice. The *Assiniboine* is the flotilla leader of our Canadian destroyers and is much bigger than the ones we took over from the States, in fact the largest of the lot. We even have a commander (whom I met) aboard because we are the flotilla leader. I shall be the Gunnery Control Officer aboard which is quite a job. But pet I don't want you to worry – I shall be as safe as can be in this ship.³⁵

The lads Tony referred to comprised *Assiniboine*'s wardroom, including regular force Lieutenants John H. Stubbs (in command), Desmond W. "Debbie" Piers (the first lieutenant, or executive officer), and Ralph L. Hennessy, and, from the RCNVR, Lieutenant Commander William F. Campbell and Lieutenant John "Panner" Brock.³⁶ They were an impressive group. Stubbs

³⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter T186, November 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter T208, December 1940, Coughlin Papers.

³⁶ Royal Canadian Navy, *The Navy List*, February 1941. John Hamilton Stubbs joined the RCN as a Cadet in 1930. By the time Tony joined him in *Assiniboine*, he was an acting lieutenant commander, taking command of the ship from Commodore Murray in February 1941. After Tony left *Assiniboine*, Stubbs led the ship with great skill in convoy duty, winning a Distinguished Service Order for his bravery and technical aptitude sinking *U-210* in August 1942. Promoted to full lieutenant commander, Stubbs left the ship soon after for a year of shore duty. Returning to sea in command of HMCS *Athabaskan* in late 1943, Stubbs demonstrated

later commanded the powerful new Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan*, and all the others also achieved command of ships they led in combat. Among similarly sized ships in February 1941 (thus excluding the wardrooms of the armed merchant cruisers *Prince Henry*, *Prince David*, and *Prince Robert* that were double the size) this level of success could only be equaled by two ships’ wardrooms – the destroyers *Saguenay* and *St Laurent* – and with five of *Assiniboine*’s officers receiving Distinguished Service Crosses, and the sixth (Campbell) receiving a Mention in Despatches, *Assiniboine*’s group of six would be the most decorated of the three. With three of its six most senior officers dying at sea – Stubbs, Coughlin, and Campbell – the fate of the *Assiniboine*’s wardroom would also be uniquely tragic.

Tony could not have known immediately how special the group of officers he served with was, but as his first letter from *Assiniboine* indicated, he knew he was in the presence of an important figure in Captain Leonard W. Murray, who served as Commodore Commanding Halifax Force on *Assiniboine*, the fleet’s flagship, during Tony’s first months on board. The future Commander-in-Chief Northwest Atlantic’s months in *Assiniboine* – which ended by mid-

further skill in surface actions, winning a DSC for his role in the sinking of German destroyer T-29 on April 26, 1944. Three nights later, however, on 29 April, a German torpedo found *Athabaskan*’s four-inch magazine, sinking the ship in a massive blast. Stubbs’ bravery in his last moments – reportedly singing stanzas from “The Wavy Navy” to fellow survivors in the water and shouting to HMCS *Haida*’s bridge to give up its hunt for survivors only five miles from enemy guns – is legendary. He is remembered as a brilliant commander, and his death as a great loss to the RCN.

Tony spelled Lieutenant Desmond Piers’ nickname with one “b” for most of the war, but eventually corrected himself to “Debbie” in 1944. Born in 1913, the same year as Tony, but beginning his RMC Cadet training in 1930, Piers had already been a lieutenant for two years at the outbreak of war. Following his service in the *Assiniboine* as first lieutenant, Piers would take command of the destroyer *Restigouche*, where he won a DSC. He then took command of HMCS *Algonquin* in December 1943, where he was promoted to full lieutenant commander and took command of the 4th Canadian Escort Group, and where his distinguished service in the D-Day landings earned him the Légion d’honneur. Piers remained in the RCN after the war, where highlights of his service included serving as Senior Canadian Naval Officer Afloat, Atlantic in 1956, assistant chief of the naval staff (plans) from 1960-62, chairman of the Canadian Joint Staff in Washington DC, and the Canadian Representative on the NATO Military Committee after his promotion to rear admiral in 1962. Piers died in Halifax in 2005.

Five years younger than Tony, Hennessy enrolled in the RCN as a cadet in 1936, beginning the war as a sub-lieutenant. His potential was quickly noticed, however, and by 1942 he held command of HMCS *Assiniboine*, winning a DSC. His subsequent wartime career included a post as first lieutenant of *Restigouche*, command of HMCS *Kings*, the RCN’s officer training establishment, and of the destroyers *Gatineau*, *Assiniboine* (again), and *Micmac*, of which he retained command until 1947. After a distinguished post-war career commanding the cruiser *Quebec* and holding various shore appointments in Canada and abroad, Hennessy was made the Principle Naval Adviser in the unified Canadian Armed Forces (effectively the eleventh commander of the Canadian navy) as a vice admiral. He died in Ottawa in 2014.

March – were his only service at sea in the entirety of the war.³⁷

In his second letter written once the ship had departed, Tony told Martha, “needless to say I am learning a lot but so have a long way to go before becoming efficient at my new job.”³⁸ The ship’s frequent testing of the guns, undertaking of drills, and night exercises proved very useful for its new Gunnery Control Officer, who labelled them “very helpful and interesting.” Otherwise, Tony struggled with sea sickness and tried to get his sea legs so he could read and write. He found dining a challenge (laughing, “I used to think eating in a dining car was quite a problem”) and got used to sleeping with his clothes on, taking off only his shoes and jacket when going to bed.³⁹

Tony’s appointment to *Assiniboine* coincided with orders for the ship to transfer to United Kingdom waters in January 1941.⁴⁰ Once there, *Assiniboine* carried out escort duties. As Tony explained to Martha on 16 March, “if you know anyone in the Army or Air Force who came over recently – they were probably escorted in by us.”⁴¹ While appreciative of his prior training, Tony

³⁷ Murray, one of Canada’s great naval leaders of the Second World War (and indeed of its naval history), was one of the first recruits of Halifax’s Royal Naval College of Canada. At the outbreak of war, Captain Murray was appointed Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, and crossing the Atlantic with *Assiniboine*, became Commodore Commanding Canadian Ships, working closely with the Royal Navy Admiralty in London. By mid-1941, however, he was back in Canada, and his successive commands of the Newfoundland Escort Force, Mid-Ocean Escort Force, Atlantic Coast, and in 1943, appointment as Commander-in-Chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic, made him the most important Canadian naval operational commander of the war, and the only Canadian officer across services to command a full theatre of war. Known for his sea smarts, trust in the sailors he commanded, and visionary leadership in convoy warfare, Murray was well-respected by Canadians and their allies. However, his role in the 1945 VE Day riots in Halifax, releasing sailors from their barracks for celebrations that morphed into riots, costing \$5 million in damages, was found by political leaders to be inexcusable. Blamed for the riots and removed from his command, Murray left Canada for the United Kingdom, and was never properly recognized in his lifetime for his vital part in winning the Battle of the Atlantic. See Marc Milner, “Rear-Admiral Leonard Warren Murray: Canada’s Most Important Operational Commander,” in *The Admirals: Canada’s Senior Naval Leadership in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Michael Whitby, Richard Gimblett, and Peter Haydon (Toronto: Dundurn, 2006), 97-124; and Government of Canada, “Rear-Admiral Leonard Murray One of Canada’s Most Important Wartime Commanders,” Canada.ca, November 10, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/corporate/history-heritage/canadian-naval-heroes/leonard-murray.html>.

³⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter A2, Friday, 17 January 1941, Coughlin Papers.

³⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter A3, Sunday, 26 January 194, Coughlin Papers.

⁴⁰ W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty, and Michael Whitby, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, Vol II, Part I, 1939-1943* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing and the Department of National Defence, 2002), 151-53.

⁴¹ CRC to MHC, Letter A36, Sunday, 16 March 1941, Coughlin Papers. In this early period, the only official convoy to have been escorted by *Assiniboine* was TC9, which was a five merchant ship convoy the ship joined for only two days. It is possible that the escorts of troop

continued to learn throughout this period, telling Martha, “There is really an awful lot to learn. All the courses that I have had, although very good, were only a spattering. I will learn much more too, in this ship than in any other.”⁴²

While perhaps frustrated by the ship’s lack of action, Tony was thrilled with the officers he served with. Just weeks after joining the ship, Tony told Martha, “You know pet, I am so glad the boys aboard here are not stuffy. Quite often a VR has rather a tough time at first with the RCN lads. But since I have been aboard here everyone has been so decent to me, and when you bring a friend aboard it is the same way.” Indeed, his experiences were in some contrast to those of his friend Barry O’ Brien, also in UK waters with the corvette *Trillium*, who had been so lonely – since “the lads [presumably officers] in his ship – only 2 others plus the captain – are all much older” – he could not stop telling Tony how glad he was to see him when they finally met up on 30 January.⁴³

On Saturday, 5 April 1941, Tony reported to Martha, “had a bit of excitement, but nothing serious.”⁴⁴ That excitement was *Assiniboine*’s collision with MV *Lairdswood*, which would put the destroyer in for repairs in Greenock, Scotland, until 22 May.⁴⁵ In the intervening time, both officers and ship’s company took time away from the ship. For Tony, this meant going to Portsmouth, for a course at the gunnery school at His Majesty’s Ship *Excellent*. The three-week gunnery course Tony took is not recorded on his service record, and although he was uncharacteristically silent regarding what it meant for his future prospects, he did enjoy the course immensely. Rather than taking a class, Tony usually had an instructor to himself, telling Martha “I can cover much more that way as well as learn it better.”⁴⁶ With no exams in the course, Tony was not under any pressure to retain information, yet worked each night until midnight, explaining to Martha, “if it wasn’t just for increasing my knowledge or personal satisfaction, I wouldn’t be doing it.”⁴⁷

At the conclusion of the course, Tony made his way back to *Assiniboine* in Greenock, but not before stopping in London. There, Tony saw Steve Clemens, secretary to recently promoted Commodore Commanding Canadian Ships and Establishments in the United Kingdom Leonard Murray. He received

ships to which Tony refers were not officially logged in the same manner.

⁴² CRC to MHC, Letter A31, Tuesday, 11 March 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁴³ CRC to MHC, Letter A7, Thursday, 30 January 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁴⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter A57, Saturday, 5 April 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁴⁵ Located at the mouth of the river Clyde, Greenock was a frequent stop for RCN ships and later in 1941 would become the site of the RCN manning depot HMCS *Niobe*.

⁴⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter A68, Wednesday, 16 April 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁴⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter A73, Tuesday, 22 April 1941, Coughlin Papers.

something more than expected when Murray took them to lunch at a club in London. Still clearly in awe, Tony reflected later to Martha that he had “never seen so much gold braid.... [A]nd here poor little me, a VR Lieutenant.”⁴⁸

Tony had told Martha that he was excited to return to the ship “because there will be so many letters there for me,” but when he returned, he found another letter he must have been excited for – his “flimsy,” which, in Tony’s words, says “very briefly what the captain thinks of you.”⁴⁹ Penned by Murray, it read, “To my entire satisfaction, a capable gunnery control officer who brings to his work more zeal and energy than I have ever seen before.” The assessment clearly pleased Tony, who commented, “coming from a Commodore I thought that was a pretty high rating.”⁵⁰ Reflecting on his relationship with Murray, Tony returned to his lunch two days earlier, remembering, “He was very friendly when he took me to lunch the other day – pointing out this Admiral and that General to me. Gave me a great build up when he introduced me to an Admiral – who was a gunnery man.”⁵¹ The positive impression Tony made on such an experienced sailor as Murray is notable. Further, given Murray’s upcoming operational command of the Canadian Atlantic naval effort, a positive impression on him was of no small utility. The RCN’s officer corps remained small and personal connections consequential: Murray would have been aware of each of Tony’s appointments and, by mid-1942, likely involved in them.⁵²

⁴⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter A80, Friday, 2 May 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁴⁹ On the waiting letters, CRC to MHC, Letter A69, Friday, 18 April 1941. On the flimsy, CRC to MHC, Letter A82, Sunday, 4 May 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵⁰ Unremarkable without context, the phrase “To my entire satisfaction” was in fact the highest rating bestowed on officers at the time and can be translated today as outstanding performance. The unassuming wording exemplifies the naval tendency to understatement, a predilection which came naturally to Tony as well. Interestingly, this assessment was written by Murray as the most senior officer on board, although operational command of *Assiniboine* would have remained with Stubbs. Tony’s assessment is in CRC to MHC, Letter A82, Sunday, 4 May 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵¹ CRC to MHC, Letter A82, Sunday, 4 May 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵² Murray’s influence on appointments and the importance of his personal impressions is evident in the circumstances that gave Tony his first command in 1943. After HMCS *Chilliwack*’s engine room had been found in an unacceptable state in early 1943, its commanding officer, Acting Lt. Cdr. Leslie Lewendon Foxall, RCNR, was held responsible. Discussing how best to approach Foxall’s command, Murray commented that “Lieutenant Commander Foxall has done excellent work in command of Corvette on escort duties in the days of very inexperienced junior officers, and though he may not have been able to make an inefficient Acting Chief ERA keep the Engine Room in good order, I still consider him a fighting officer of considerable value. I recommend he be given another command after four to six months in his present employment.” While Foxall did not receive his next appointment as quickly as Murray recommended (he took command of the frigate HMCS *Loch Morlich* ten months later), the passage underlined

Tony returned to Greenock on 4 May, just in time for the "Greenock Blitz," one of the most notable German aerial raids in the west of Scotland. The attack, while targeting ships berthed around the town like *Assiniboine*, instead did massive damage to the civilian population, damaging or destroying one in six of the 180,000 homes in Greenock and causing nearly 10,500 deaths or injuries. Tony wrote a remarkable letter with the experience still fresh in his mind which is included as an appendix to this article. For their role in assisting the townspeople during and after the blitz, the ship's company of *Assiniboine* received letters of commendation from the manager of the shipyard where they were berthed and from the flag officer, Greenock. Moreover, Tony and Panner Brock received special mention from Stubbs in his report after the incident, as having "showed particular qualities of determination and courage during the operations."⁵³ Tony's demonstration of his leadership under fire – especially, it seems, as other officers chose to remain below – is noteworthy and would foreshadow similar later success.

Repairs completed, on 23 May *Assiniboine* joined OB236, a convoy of 47 merchant ships from Liverpool, only to leave it three days later.⁵⁴ The reason was a good one. On 27 May, Tony reported to Martha, "you no doubt heard the news about the HMS *Hood* being sunk off the coast of Greenland and then the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck* today. We were quite interested in both of those, if you gather what I mean."⁵⁵ Clarifying in a later letter, he told her that they "were out in that show with *King George V* and *Victorious*. We were clipping along at nearly top speed all the time."⁵⁶ Indeed, *Assiniboine* helped escort those larger ships of the Home Fleet to the battle, departing before the fighting began to refuel in Iceland. After the sinking of *Bismarck*, *Assiniboine* returned to convoy duty.

As the summer of 1941 progressed, *Assiniboine*'s officers began to change, with Piers among the first to leave (for his own command of *Restigouche*, Ralph Hennessy taking his place as first lieutenant) and Tony not long after. Before he left, however, he received one other piece of good news, telling Martha on 30 June:

the importance and relevance of Murray's personal impressions of commanders. Leonard W. Murray to Secretary, Naval Board, "Condition of Main Engines – HMCS '*Chilliwack*,'" 7 May 1943, RG24-D-10, vol. 11069, file 41-42-1, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

⁵³ *Assiniboine* (Stubbs) to the Commodore Commanding Canadian Ships and Shore Establishments in the United Kingdom, "Conduct of Officers and Ratings," 22 May 1941, R112, vol. 30479, item 43966, LAC.

⁵⁴ Arnold Hague Convoy Database, "Ship Search: *Assiniboine*," <http://www.convoyweb.org.uk/hague/index.html>.

⁵⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter A99b, Tuesday, 27 May 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter A105, Thursday, 5 June 1941, Coughlin Papers.



HMS *Resolution* sailing in the Indian Ocean. (Imperial War Museum)

The Captain told me that he had written a letter to headquarters, recommending me for a Watch Keeping Certificate – which will give me a WK before my name in the Navy List. Already have a G in brackets there. There will not be many lieutenants junior to me who have one. It was something I wanted to get before I left this ship, and so I was quite pleased when he told me that.⁵⁷

Having made a strong impression on the commodore, earned the trust of Lieutenant Stubbs, the commanding officer, made friends in the wardroom, and displayed his leadership under fire, Tony's time in the *Assiniboine* was a clear success. Tony's second flimsy from *Assiniboine*, from Stubbs, read: "To my entire satisfaction. A most capable officer all round. He is outstanding in every way considering the short time he has been in the service."⁵⁸

Tony proceeded ashore for what proved to be a brief month of staff duty under Commander (D) Halifax George R. Miles⁵⁹ and Captain (D) Halifax E.R.

⁵⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter A126, Monday, 30 June 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter S2.10, Sunday, 17 August 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁵⁹ Commodore George R. Miles, OBE, MID, joined the RCN's cadet program in 1916. At the outbreak of the Second World War, then-Lieutenant Commander Miles held command of HMCS *Saguenay*, which he would maintain until taking on shore appointments from 1941-43. Returning to sea in command of HMCS *Athabaskan* for most of 1943, Miles would hold progressively senior shore appointments until his 1948 command of the aircraft carrier HMCS *Magnificent*, during which he served as senior Canadian naval officer afloat. He then returned to shore, dying while serving in 1951 as commodore commanding the RCN's barracks in Esquimalt.

"Rollo" Mainguy.⁶⁰ After some confusion, he got his new assignment – aboard the British battleship HMS *Resolution*, which he recognized as "a really good break."⁶¹ If sad to leave the RCN behind, Tony recognized the rarity of his opportunity and resolved to make the most of his "big ship time."⁶² Tony left Halifax immediately, joining *Resolution* in early September in Philadelphia.

HMS *Resolution* was a 620-foot superdreadnought laid down in November 1913, one of five Revenge-class battleships which saw service in both world wars. At Tony's joining, the ship's armament included eight fifteen-inch guns, twelve six-inch guns, and, for anti-aircraft defence, four twin four-inch and two two-pounder eight-barrel guns, and lighter high-angle guns. Capable of travel at 22 knots, its complement comprised forty-eight officers and 949 crew. While its service in the First World War and interwar periods was limited, it took part in the Norwegian campaign in April-May 1940 and the destruction of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir in July 1940, before being torpedoed in the Battle of Dakar later that year. Tony joined the ship as the repairs from that torpedoing – and a simultaneous refit – were being completed.

The most immediate challenge for Tony aboard *Resolution*, besides the procurement of tropical rig, was the adjustment to a much larger ship. As he told Martha in his second letter after arriving, "Everything is so different here from aboard a destroyer."⁶³ For Tony, it was "almost like learning all over again," but he viewed this only as a positive, telling her a week after arriving, "Had a very busy day with new things happening for me – from a knowledge point of view. Certainly glad I was given the opportunity of coming to a big ship. Feel that I shall be that much better qualified than all the other VRs. The

⁶⁰ Born in Victoria and twelve years older than Tony, Mainguy began the Second World War as a commander, in command of HMCS *Assiniboine*. From April 1940 to July 1941, he commanded the C-Class destroyer *Ottawa*, during which time he was promoted to captain. Leaving *Ottawa*, he held shore appointments including captain (D) Halifax and captain (D) Newfoundland, before being appointed as an acting commodore and serving as commodore commanding Newfoundland Force in 1942. He served as chief of naval personnel in Ottawa from 1942-1944, before taking command of HMCS *Uganda*, a light cruiser which saw action in the Pacific theatre at the conclusion of the war. After the war, Mainguy, popular with sailors, served as both flag officer Pacific Coast and flag officer Atlantic Coast, before heading the 1949 commission of inquiry into insubordination in the RCN (the Mainguy Commission). Mainguy became chief of the naval staff in 1951 and retired from the RCN as a vice admiral in 1956.

⁶¹ CRC to MHC, Letter S2.27, Friday, 5 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶² It was a longstanding practice for aspiring RCN officers to spend time in Royal Navy major warships, which offered them an unparalleled opportunity to immerse themselves in naval culture, gain exposure to larger ships, and explore the relationship between officers and a ship's company. For more, see, Richard Leir, "'Big Ship Time': The Formative Years of RCN Officers Serving in RN Capital Ships," in *The RCN in Retrospect: 1910-1968*, ed. James A. Boutilier (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982).

⁶³ CRC to MHC, Letter R2, Thursday, 11 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

experience is really something.”⁶⁴

Indeed, from the beginning of his time on the ship, Tony recognized the benefits his appointment could bring. On 21 September, the second anniversary of his marriage with Martha, Tony wrote: “I shall be a better officer for it. I want to be the best VR in the whole flaming navy and this little spell will help an awful lot. There are lots of Lieut of the RCN – who haven’t served time in battleships – especially those who have become that rank since the war. And then at that, their stay has not been longer than mine will be.”⁶⁵ Tony also counted himself lucky not to be in a corvette, telling Martha, “Know all about them as it is. It is a much lonelier life than that of a destroyer or larger ship.”⁶⁶

Tony brought his customary work ethic to his new responsibilities in *Resolution*. As he told Martha a few months into his time on the ship, “Perhaps in one way I shouldn’t work so hard because it might make my chances of leaving the ship more remote.... However, I wouldn’t want to do any job and not put forward my best effort.”⁶⁷ Working as a gunnery lieutenant, Tony told Martha he was “getting some wonderful experience – practical too” and “working fairly long hours.”⁶⁸ When he joined *Resolution* in September 1941, the ship was completing a workup. These rigorous exercises of the entire personnel gave Tony “lots and lots of what I was sent here for ... in fact every day from morning until after dark.”⁶⁹

In *Resolution*, Tony had the benefit of working with a far more experienced group of officers than he would have had access to in the RCN. “They have nearly all been in numerous naval encounters,” he told Martha, “Matapan, Narvick, Oran, Dakar, Velona Greece etc.”⁷⁰ His new shipmates were also remarkably welcoming. While his second letter saw him admit to Martha that he was “a little lonely,” within a few weeks he reported that he was “Getting along splendidly aboard and find all the lads very easily [sic] to get along with, much better than I thought it would be. Not at all stuffy.”⁷¹

Tony had joined *Resolution* amidst a refit in Philadelphia, just before it

⁶⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter R4, 14 September 1941; CRC to MHC, Letter R6, Wednesday, 17 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter R10, Sunday, 21 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter R11, Monday, 22 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter R46, Friday, 28 November 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter R8, Saturday, 19 September 1941; and CRC to MHC, Letter R9, Sunday, 20 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁶⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter R13, Thursday, 25 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁰ CRC to MHC, Letter R13, Thursday 25 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷¹ He admitted loneliness in CRC to MHC, Letter R2, Thursday, 11 September 1941, Coughlin Papers. Things were better in CRC to MHC, Letter R16a, Sunday, 28 September 1941, Coughlin Papers.

proceeded to Plymouth, where from October until late November new radar, armor, and guns were added which could only be fitted in the United Kingdom.⁷² As he became more familiar with the ship, Tony took on more responsibility, writing to Martha, "Have been so busy the last few days I hardly knew where I was at – Good experience though and lots of responsibility in my new job. Had no idea there was really so much to it."⁷³ By 25 October, six weeks into his time on board, he was in "complete charge" of gunnery on board for over a week with the gunnery officer away, having seniority in gunnery to the five Royal Navy lieutenants also with the ship. Even if the ship was far from action, such responsibility is remarkable given that only a year earlier Tony was just completing his "Long G" course in Halifax, a testament to his ability to learn quickly. "It is really terrific – moreso than I had ever dreamed of," he told Martha. "Must have the confidence of my senior officers or else I should never be doing what I am. Do hope I can handle it well because I do so want to make a good job of it. It is a splendid opportunity."⁷⁴ The next day, he added: "What I had been doing previously in this war is child's play to my present work."⁷⁵

October 1941 also saw Tony take up a familiar position as the ship's sports officer, "really a big thing in peacetime" made somewhat more difficult by his lack of knowledge of English games, but with added importance given the lack of action *Resolution* was experiencing at the time.⁷⁶ Soon after, in late November, *Resolution* sailed to Scapa Flow for further working up exercises.

The impression Tony made on his senior officers in his first four months in *Resolution* is perhaps most evident from the following passage to Martha marking the ship's commander J.D. Harvey's birthday on 6 January 1942:

Today was our Commander's birthday and this morning he called me into his cabin and told me so. He said he always thought the best present he could receive was to give someone else a present and so he was going to give me one – This was it – he said that I was one of the best officers aboard the whole ship and that he wanted me to know what he thought and how much he appreciated my efforts. Said it has been a pleasure to have me in his ship from the first day I joined and that if he could only get a few more like me, he wouldn't have a care in the world.⁷⁷

⁷² Lt. Cmdr. Geoffrey B. Mason (Rtd), "HMS Resolution," *Naval-History.Net*, 2003, <https://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-01BB-Resolution.htm>.

⁷³ CRC to MHC, Letter R22b, Friday, 10 October 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter R32, Monday, 3 November 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter R33, Tuesday, 5 November 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter R27a, Tuesday, 28 October 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter R79, Tuesday, 6 January 1942, Coughlin Papers.

In January 1942, following the outbreak of the Pacific war, *Resolution* took on more sailors as the ship prepared for operations in the Indian Ocean against the Japanese. Tony displayed characteristic empathy for their seasickness, writing, "Right now they would probably like nothing better than death ... I know what it is like myself."⁷⁸ As *Resolution* travelled south towards South Africa, it joined Convoy WS-15, arriving in Freetown on 25 January. *Resolution* spent many days at sea (Tony remarked, "Gosh I remember when I used to think seven days was a lot") and lingered in port in South Africa throughout February, awaiting new orders after its mission to assist in the defence of Singapore was rendered pointless by that city's fall to the Japanese.⁷⁹ In this period, *Resolution* served as the flagship for the vice admiral commanding the 3rd Battle Squadron of the Eastern Fleet, marking the second time Tony had served aboard a flagship in his two appointments to sea.

In March, *Resolution* sailed from South Africa, through Kilindini (in Kenya) and Colombo (in present day Sri Lanka) to Addu Atoll (the southernmost atoll of the Maldives). These operations, in which *Resolution* was joined by several destroyers and aging aircraft carriers and battleships (all that the thinly stretched Royal Navy could spare from the Atlantic and Mediterranean), were designed to prevent the Imperial Japanese Navy from entering and taking control of the Indian Ocean. As March turned to April, however, it became clear that such a task was impossible due to the strength of the Japanese fleet (and the poor speed and anti-aircraft armament of older ships like *Resolution*), and so *Resolution* was sent back to Kilindini in early May.⁸⁰ Accordingly, between the ship's extensive working up process in Tony's first three months aboard and the decidedly lost game of chicken with the Japanese fleet in 1942, Tony's service undoubtedly gave him solid experience, but it was light on naval action. Other parts of Tony's life took on new importance, such as his role as ship sports officer, in which he devised and ran an "Inter-Part Olympiad" deck hockey league, boxing tournament for canteen credits, and a tug of war.⁸¹ Organizing these events for Tony was primarily to "help the troops.... Especially when on long trips," and he viewed his job as "one of the most important jobs in the ship from the point of view of welfare of the ship's company."⁸² Tony was so effective in his role that he earned a promotion to squadron sports officer on 15 April, responsible for making "practically all

⁷⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter R84, Monday, 12 January 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁷⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter R112, Wednesday, 11 February 1942, Coughlin Papers. On Singapore, Mason, "HMS Resolution."

⁸⁰ Mason, "HMS Resolution."

⁸¹ CRC to MHC, Letter R115, Saturday, 14 February 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁸² CRC to MHC, Letter R129, Monday, 2 March 1942; and CRC to MHC, Letter R173, Tuesday, 21 April 1942, Coughlin Papers.

arrangements of the other ships matches" and, in the culmination of his work in the role, he was eventually made fleet recreational officer ("boy don't think that isn't a big job ... there seems to always be someone looking for me").⁸³ Organized sports are a vital part of military life and this recognition of Tony's leadership skills was remarkable for a Canadian VR lieutenant still getting used to the Royal Navy.

Tony was undoubtedly popular among the officers and ratings aboard *Resolution*. On 26 January 1942, he told Martha of a show the officers had put on for the ship's crew, during which:

When I walked across the stage I got a terrific hand whistling and cheers etc before I had even said a word. Now pet I am not bragging but just telling you alone what happened. Well when my group had finished, each one walked out individually to be judged (by applause). I was the second to go and when the applause went up the MC just sent the other two off ... When the show was over my servant said to me in my cabin – 'It is easy to see who the popular officers are aboard.' Of course I laughed that off. We had a lot of fun in the Wardroom about it afterwards.⁸⁴

As April turned to May, it became clear that Tony's time in *Resolution* – already requested by the gunnery officer to be extended once – was coming to an end.⁸⁵ Reflecting on his time on board, he felt that it had been "very enjoyable and I must admit very beneficial. Couldn't have had a better period from a point of learning what I came aboard for and also from almost any other viewpoint either."⁸⁶ He began to turn over his duties and, despite the mock protest of his commander writing "not approved" on the signal ordering his return to Canada, by mid-May Tony was on his way home.⁸⁷ While there is a gap in Tony's letters from 11 May onwards, a 16 May letter that *Resolution's* Commander Harvey wrote to Martha praising her husband (Harvey addressed the letter to Mrs. Smith, a reflection of her husband's nickname of "Smith,"

⁸³ On becoming Squadron Sports Officer, CRC to MHC, Letter R168, Wednesday, 15 April 1942, Coughlin Papers. On becoming fleet sports officer, CRC to MHC, Letter R190, Saturday, 9 May 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁸⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter R96, Monday, 26 January 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁸⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter R187, Thursday, 7 May 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁸⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter R181, Thursday, 30 April 1942, Coughlin Papers.

⁸⁷ As Tony told Martha, "Yesterday the 1st Lieut, myself, and an officer from another ship just casually mentioned my return to Canada as the Commander was passing and he turned around and said: 'Oh no he's not, I wrote 'not approved' on the signal.' Not seriously meaning, it, however, that I wasn't going back, although he did write 'not approved' on the signal I think, because he told me so. He has treated me very decently ever since I first came aboard." CRC to MHC, Letter R191, Sunday, 10 May 1942, Coughlin Papers.

a name with apparent significance at the time that is lost on this author).⁸⁸ It read, in part,

“Smith” has done a job of work onboard which no one else onboard but he could have done; and he will leave a gap in our life which as far as I know cannot and will not be filled.... He has been in more ways for me the life and soul of the ship. He’s a born leader of men, and whilst having a good sense of duty, and of right and wrong, which enables him to tell them where they get off when they go wrong, his infectious enthusiasm and blatant goodwill enables him to carry out his duties without ever offending anyone.⁸⁹

Returning to Halifax, Tony again joined the staff of captain (D) Halifax, still Commander George R. Miles, but very soon to be Commander James “Jimmy” Hibbard.⁹⁰ While Tony was prohibited from discussing the details of his work with Martha, he was able to convey how much he had to do: “I have two phones on my desk and they seem to be always ringing at times” and that he usually stayed in the office until 6:30 pm.⁹¹ The duties of the captain (D) Halifax office in this period were varied and multifaceted. In an interview decades after the war, Hibbard emphasized the creation of an Action Room to simulate specific tactical challenges in battle on a full scale mock-up of a ship’s bridge (an early precursor to today’s computer simulation training), the institution of the first ever command course for RCN officers, and most significantly, training ships at sea.⁹² This latter was undoubtedly Tony’s role when he had worked briefly under Miles and Mainguy in 1941 and he returned with much more experience. While the details of Tony’s work over the winter of

⁸⁸ This is disappointing, but we are lucky at the completeness of the letters up to this point given all possible disruptions. Recognizing the good fortune that he was receiving all of Martha’s letters, he wrote her: “We must certainly be winning this old Battle of the Atlantic.” CRC to MHC, Letter R50, Wednesday, 3 December 1941, Coughlin Papers.

⁸⁹ JDH to MHC, Letter 1, 16 May 1942, Coughlin Papers.

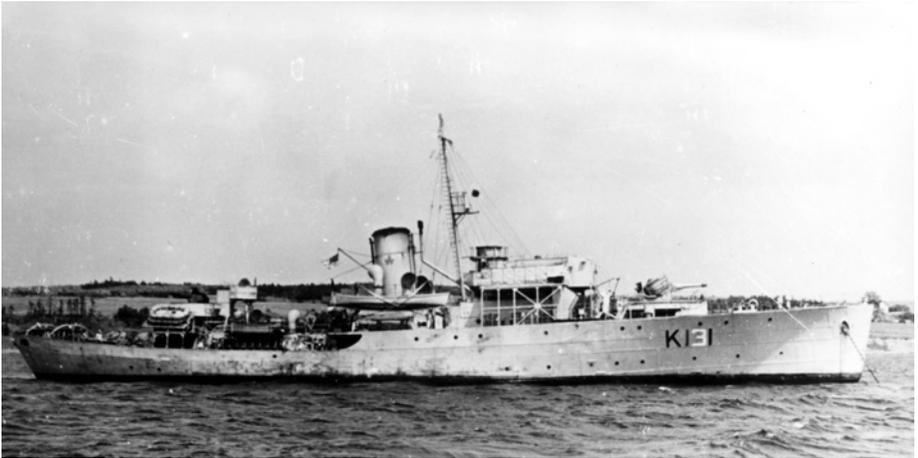
⁹⁰ James Calcutt Hibbard, DSC was only five years older than Tony, but his naval career began as a midshipman in 1927, serving “big ship time” in HM Ships *Erebus* and *Emperor of India*. Hibbard started the war as a lieutenant, but by January of 1940 was promoted to lieutenant commander and soon took command of the destroyer *Skeena*, an appointment that he would hold until the end of 1941, after which he became the executive officer of the captain (D) Halifax staff. After his subsequent time as captain (D) Halifax, Hibbard took command of *Iroquois* in 1943, before being promoted to captain and commodore in various shore appointments until he took command of the cruiser *Ontario* from 1947-49. Promoted rear-admiral in 1953, Hibbard would retire with a DSC and bar as flag officer Pacific Coast in 1955.

⁹¹ On the ringing phones, CRC to MHC, Letter S3.26, Tuesday, August 1942; on his hours, CRC to MHC, Letter S3.16, Thursday, August, 1942.

⁹² J.C. Hibbard to Chris Bell, “My Navy Recollections,” 23 April 1983, Reginald H. Roy Collection of Interviews, University of Victoria. <http://contentdm.library.uvic.ca/cdm/ref/collection/collection13/id/989>.

1942-3 are unclear, being at the centre of new tactical developments, doctrine changes, and equipment modifications, he would have gained significant exposure to the rapid changes the RCN was experiencing during the period.

The letters of September 1942 would be the last between Tony and Martha for over a year. Having found an apartment on South Park St., close to the Lord Nelson Hotel, the couple finally reunited for their longest spell together since 1937. This no doubt improved Tony’s life considerably, as his nights became a source of joy rather than the boredom that had often defined them. From a historical perspective, however, this gap is unfortunately timed, as



HMCS *Chilliwack*, circa. 1942. (Wikimedia Commons)

it coincides with the height of the RCN’s “equipment crisis.” This crisis stemmed from the service’s massive escort obligations – its ships comprised 48 percent of Atlantic escorts in 1942 – combined with delays (most out of the service’s control) in fitting vessels with the most modern anti-submarine equipment being developed in Britain, whose overburdened industry was unable to quickly supply the RCN or provide full manufacturing specifications to Canada’s burgeoning war plants.⁹³ Tony’s connections to the situation were numerous: many of his closest friends in the navy were consulted by civilian political authorities investigating the situation (and he may have been as well), and in captain (D) Halifax’s office he would have been at the centre of efforts to mitigate the problem.⁹⁴ His observations would have been invaluable, but

⁹³ The RCN’s equipment crisis is covered in numerous sources – for example, Douglas, Sarty, and Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, Vol II, Part 2, 1943-1945*, 23-67.

⁹⁴ These consultations were carried out by the navy minister Angus L. MacDonald’s executive

regrettably are absent.

Despite the lack of letters, four major events from the period bear discussing. First, on 1 January 1943, Tony was made an acting lieutenant commander, a significant promotion. Second, in February 1943, Tony was selected to join the first ever RCN command course, an initiative designed by Hibbard (conceivably with Tony's help), to train VR officers before they took on their first command. Tony would graduate with the first course on Saturday, 17 April 1943, as one of the thirteen of sixteen enrollees recommended for command after their training. Third, on 16 July 1943, Tony attempted to save a drowning man and was nominated for a Royal Humane Society Medal by Captain J.D. "Chummy" Prentice, the innovative anti-submarine tactician who had succeeded Hibbard as captain (D) Halifax.⁹⁵ Finally, in the summer of 1943, Tony received his first command, the corvette HMCS *Chilliwack*, which was undergoing a much-needed refit in Halifax to install a Type-271 radar, an extended fo'c'sle, and new anti-submarine weaponry. By October, the 205-foot long Flower-class corvette was ready for sea, capable of travelling 3500 nautical miles at twelve knots. Its complement of 79 crew were led by six officers, deploying firepower of one four-inch gun, one two-pounder gun, two twenty-millimeter Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns, and, thanks to the refit, a hedgehog anti-submarine weapon. Martha returned to Ottawa on October 21, and letters between her and Tony resumed once again.

In his second letter to Martha after going to sea in *Chilliwack*, Tony reflected, "Well it certainly seems a little strange to be at sea again with so much responsibility. However, I am bearing up under it, all right. It certainly is good experience."⁹⁶ *Chilliwack* immediately began work up exercises and Tony's experiences were positive, telling Martha, "Everything is going splendidly here. All the crew seem very keen and we are really starting to click. The laundry situation may start to get a little grim though before long."⁹⁷

One noteworthy early experience for Tony came when his ship was undergoing its final inspection, coincidentally conducted by former shipmate acting Lieutenant Commander Desmond Piers. Tony told Martha, "Debie P. gave me a bit of a shock this morning. He told me I was nearly taken off this

assistant John Joseph Connolly, and included contact with Tony's friends Barry O'Brien, Louis Audette, Jock Piggott, and Stu Cockfield. While there is no clear record of Connolly's contact with Tony, he did congratulate him on his DSC in 1944. Richard Oliver Mayne, "Behind the Scenes at Naval Service Headquarters: Bureaucratic Politics and the Dismissal of Vice-admiral Percy W. Nelles" (Master's thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 56.

⁹⁵ J.D. Prentice to commander in chief Canadian Northwest Atlantic, "Rescue by A/Lieut. Cdr. (G) C.R. Coughlin, RCNVR," 6 August 1943, R112, vol 30479, item 43966, LAC.

⁹⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter C2, Saturday, 23 October 1943, Coughlin Papers.

⁹⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter C6, Thursday, 28 October 1943, Coughlin Papers.

ship last week but they decided that since I had worked this one up so to leave me here. And guess where I was to go? To a larger one than this, in command. Boy that really shook me."⁹⁸ While only these cryptic details are available, the fact that Tony was nearly placed in command of a larger ship (undoubtedly a frigate) with six months of RCN sea-going experience is remarkable and another testament to the impression he must have made in Halifax. While he was not entirely averse to the decision, explaining, "I am just as glad to stay here for a spell to gain a little more experience.... I have learned plenty since taking this one over and shall learn still more," he also thought of what might have been, lamenting, "hope I haven't missed my chance."⁹⁹

By 19 November, Tony had captained his first Atlantic crossing and escorted his first convoy, the fifty-one ship HX265. On 1 December, Tony sailed again, escorting convoy ONS24, then on 20 December the fifty-three ships in convoy HX271. In this period, we can glean his growing comfort in the role, whether in his avoidance of seasickness, ease with extended periods on the bridge entering or leaving harbour, or confidence in writing more official correspondence than he had ever written in his life. He quickly learned how to handle the corvette, remarking, "Boy we certainly ran into some weather today. But the ship took it wonderfully well. I was amazed at the way she reacted – just perfectly. Far much better than a destroyer – at least in this sea anyway."¹⁰⁰ As he told Martha on 3 December, "I am quite happy onboard here and everything is running smoothly."¹⁰¹ Finally, Tony indicated his pleasure at serving under Commander P.W. Burnett, RN, the Senior Officer of the escort group C-2 in HMCS *Gatineau*, who had been loaned to the RCN in 1943, calling him "very capable."¹⁰²

Chilliwack returned to the UK on 29 December and Tony immediately left

⁹⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter C15a, Monday, 8 November 1943, Coughlin Papers.

⁹⁹ CRC to MHC, Letter C15a, Monday, 8 November 1943; and CRC to MHC, Letter C16, 9 November 1943, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰⁰ On his ease on the bridge, CRC to MHC, Letter C24, Friday, 19 November 1943, Coughlin Papers. On correspondence, CRC to MHC, Letter C50, Sunday, 19 December 1943, Coughlin Papers. On the ship's handling in weather, CRC to MHC, Letter C44, Saturday, 11 December 1943, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰¹ CRC to MHC, Letter C36, Friday, 3 December 1943, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰² On Burnett's loan, Douglas, Sarty, and Whitby, *Blue Water Navy*, 31. Burnett would later go on to be a rear admiral in the RN. Tony's quote comes from CRC to MHC, Letter C32, Monday, 29 November 1943, Coughlin Papers. A fascinating perspective on the experience of these RN officers commanding Canadian escort groups is offered by RN Commander A.F.C. Layard, in his diary annotated by historian Michael Whitby, *Commanding Canadians: The Second World War Diaries of A.F.C. Layard* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

for a weeklong course in Liverpool.¹⁰³ While there, he received unexpected good news. A week earlier, he had declared, “I am hardly excited at all this year” for the announcement of new promotions, but on 4 January 1944, he shared that he had been promoted to full lieutenant-commander (no longer “acting”).¹⁰⁴ Of the promotion, he reported, “I feel pretty good ... it really makes a difference.”¹⁰⁵

While Tony mentioned his relationship with the ship’s company only sparingly in his letters, Jamie MacMillan, son of the ship’s chief radio operator, John MacMillan, has generously provided a story which sheds some light on Tony’s leadership in this period:

I remember hearing (and it is written somewhere) about Dad being put up on charges for not getting an entire message into the ship. His supervisor pressed the charges and they were not on good terms. Dad had in fact missed part of the message, and had as part of his duties that day contacted other radio operators in the convoy who were on duty to see if any of them had received the entire message. Apparently all had missed the message. My understanding is that Captain Tony was pleased to see that my dad had made the extra effort to try and hunt down the entire communication and my dad was exonerated and the supervisor who brought the charges was let go to another ship.¹⁰⁶

Throughout this period, Tony and *Chilliwack* remained on convoy duty. On 1 February convoy ON221 was “badly scattered” by a force eight gale in which *Chilliwack* sustained minor damage. The next day, while rounding up stragglers, *Chilliwack* found the merchant ship *John L. Sullivan*, which had such damage that “in any kind of sea, cracks opened considerably with great danger of ship breaking completely in half.”¹⁰⁷ The nature of the damage to *John L. Sullivan* – weather damage – demonstrated an increasingly obvious reality: aided by additional escorts with new equipment and better tactics, Allied merchant convoys were often escaping the U-Boat menace that had caused such problems throughout 1941, 1942, and early 1943. As the next month would show, however, the danger was far from over.

On 24 February *Chilliwack* was called away “in a bit of a flap” to sea, with orders to meet and tow the sloop HMS *Woodpecker*, severely damaged by a

¹⁰³ CRC to MHC, Letter C63, Monday, 3 January 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter C54, Wednesday, 22 December 1943, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter C68, Saturday, 8 January 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁰⁶ Jamie Macmillan, email to the author, 4 August 2021.

¹⁰⁷ C.R. Coughlin to Captain (D) St. John’s, “February Report of Proceedings,” 17 March 1944, RG24-D-13, vol. 11736, file CS 161-24-3, LAC.



Boarding party from HMCS *Chilliwack* alongside the German submarine *U-744* at sea, 6 March 1944. (Library and Archives Canada)

U-boat torpedo, which they did on 26 February.¹⁰⁸ However, that same day, *Woodpecker* was forced to abandon ship, with *Chilliwack* taking on 32 of its crew and sinking the vessel by gunfire.

On 28 February, *Chilliwack* sailed from Plymouth, rendezvousing with Escort Group C2 to escort the 63-ship convoy HX280 on 3 March. On 5 March, they left the convoy to begin the pursuit of a U-boat detected nearby. Over the next thirty hours, *Chilliwack* and several other ships under the command of HMCS *Gatineau*'s Commander Burnett attempted to force the U-boat to surface, alternating holding asdic (sonar) contact, and bombarding

¹⁰⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter C111, Friday, 25 February 1944, Coughlin Papers. *Woodpecker* was a member of the 2nd Escort Group, under the overall command of Captain Frederick J. Walker. Commanded by Lieutenant Commander H.L. Pryse, RNR, *Woodpecker* had been credited with helping sink six U-Boats nine days before she was hit by *U-256*. Captain Walker, the most successful U-Boat hunter in the Atlantic, would die four months later of stress and battle fatigue. Tony was present for his funeral, as the ship's company of his next assignment – HMCS *Iroquois* – provided the honour guard for the funeral.

Martha Coughlin with Tony's
Distinguished Service Cross.
(Coughlin Papers)



it with depth charges.¹⁰⁹ When the submarine *U-744* finally did surface off the bow of *Chilliwack* on 7 March, Tony yelled “man that bloody Oerlikon” and *Chilliwack* signalman Jack Starr – handling the weapon for the first time in his life – raked the submarine’s conning tower.¹¹⁰ After further guns were brought to bear and several exhausted prisoners had been rescued (and three boats had capsized attempting to board the submarine), *U-744* sank to the ocean floor.

Reflecting on the action, Tony’s report of proceedings expressed frustration at the early firing and crossing of *Chilliwack’s* bow by HMS *Kenilworth Castle*, took responsibility for his own mistake in misreading a plot and sailing on a wrong course early in the hunt, and reflected on the effective communication between ships, reporting that by the second day of the hunt, “Very informative signals passed between the three ships and a definite spirit of confidence prevailed.”¹¹¹ Tony also revealed that Burnett, the senior officer, had asked his advice on the best course of action for the hunt the first night

¹⁰⁹ For example, see Fraser McKee and Robert Darlington, *The Canadian Naval Chronicle, 1939-1945* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 1996), 121-125.

¹¹⁰ Lieutenant Commander Peter MacRitchie, “U-Boat Sinking Main Story,” 27 March 1944, RG24-D-13, vol. 11755, LAC.

¹¹¹ *Chilliwack* (C.R. Coughlin) to Captain (D) St. John’s, “Report of Hunt and Sinking of U-744,” 1 April 1944, RG24-D-13, vol. 11736, file CS 161-24-3, LAC.

they obtained contact. In reporting on the gunfire from *Chilliwack*, Tony called it "most accurate and gratifying," adding, "discipline was superb."¹¹² Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his intellect, Tony added a suggestion to his report, writing:

It is submitted that perhaps in other attacks of this nature with a U-boat taking drastic avoiding action or being under constant helm when ships are attacking, that consideration be given to an operation of three ships in line abreast carrying out a creeping attack on the same contact simultaneously, being directed as for one Ranging being done on the centre ship only. In this it is thought the U-Boat would not be able to escape.

The sinking of *U-744* was an impressive display of collaboration, determination, and adaptability from all involved. The action would win Tony a Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) and indeed it is perhaps fitting that an officer whose naval career had started with an aptitude for gunnery neutralized a U-boat using an Oerlikon. In his letter to Martha on 7 March, he beamed, "At the moment I am quite tired but also very happy and satisfied. It is a grand feeling and one of great confidence. Have achieved one of my ambitions and something I have looked forward to for quite some time now." In an indication of both his understated nature and the nature of censorship, he reflected, "It is indeed a strange feeling – so pleasantly happy and yet not being able to write about anything in particular," and proceeded immediately to discuss his tax situation.¹¹³ The next day, he wrote, "Everything is going splendidly in the ship and I feel sure we have as good a crew or better than any other ship. The morale is very high too" – while the timing of these comments is relevant in their interpretation, there is also little doubt Tony meant the words.¹¹⁴

Returning to England, Tony had a number of guests in *Chilliwack's* wardroom, but by 13 March he wrote Martha, "all the excitement from our last trip has just about worn off now. We are looking forward to the next one for a bit more."¹¹⁵ But despite Tony's focus, it seems that the same naval authorities who had previously contemplated his command of a larger ship had seen enough. A confirmed lieutenant commander with extensive time in a battleship and a U-boat kill to his name, Tony also had the support of several senior officers, most relevantly, his former superior in Halifax, Hibbard. On 17 March, ten days after the sinking of *U-744*, he wrote Martha, "I received a signal today which surprised me a bit. I am leaving here and going with

¹¹² Coughlin, "Report of Hunt and Sinking," 1 April 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹¹³ CRC to MHC, Letter C119, 7 March 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹¹⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter C120, 8 March 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹¹⁵ CRC to MHC, Letter C125, Monday, 13 March 1944, Coughlin Papers.

Lieutenant Commander Tony Coughlin as first lieutenant (executive officer) on HMCS Iroquois. (Coughlin Papers)



Jimmy H [Hibbard, now captain of destroyer HMCS *Iroquois*] – Same plan as he put before me exactly one year ago. Guess it will be good experience, but I am glad I have had command.... Gosh things certainly happen fast in this navy.¹¹⁶ The appointment placed him as the second-most senior officer in the destroyer, as first lieutenant to Hibbard, and he commented two days later to Martha, “It is Jimmy’s doings I can see that.”¹¹⁷ And while, in a repeat of his departure from *Resolution*, Commander Burnett tried (more seriously) to stop the appointment, Tony was indeed destined for his “step up.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter C128, Friday, 17 March 1944, Coughlin Papers. The “plan” of exactly a year earlier would have been hatched during Tony’s participation in the RCN’s first command course, an appointment Hibbard likely had a hand in (and a course design he definitely did). At that time, Hibbard was preparing to take command of *Iroquois*, and so it is not unlikely that Hibbard could have predicted Tony being ready to serve as his first lieutenant in *Iroquois* after spending the bulk of a year in command of his own ship. In addition to underlining the importance of Tony’s personal connections, the episode also illustrates the impression Tony must have made on Hibbard in 1942-3.

¹¹⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter C129, Sunday, 19 March 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹¹⁸ On Burnett’s futile attempts to keep Tony, CRC to MHC, Letter C131, Tuesday, 28 March 1944, Coughlin Papers. Burnett, overhearing Tony speaking about leaving, told him, “you really don’t think you are going, do you” – this eerily resembles the same phrase and circumstance

After a return to Canada, and a short time on leave with Martha (after which he apologized, “I shall try not to be so tired next time”), Tony joined Commander Jimmy Hibbard for the second time, at sea in the Tribal-class destroyer HMCS *Iroquois*. *Iroquois* was a 377-foot Tribal-class destroyer, capable of a top speed of 36 knots. Its 245 crew were led by 14 officers, wielding six 4.7-inch guns, two four-inch guns, four twenty-one inch torpedo tubes, four two-pounders, six twenty-millimeter Oerlikon guns, and depth charges. As Tony joined *Iroquois* in the spring of 1944, the ship was completing a major overhaul, modernizing its gunnery capabilities, adding type 285p gunnery and type 293 surface warning radar, and introducing a modern Action Information Organization (AIO) system to manage the resulting influx of information while in combat.¹¹⁹

At Tony’s joining, *Iroquois* was also only a year removed from a mutiny against the harsh disciplinary measures of former Captain W.B. Holms (coincidentally, Tony’s commanding officer in *Stone Frigate*).¹²⁰ Joining *Iroquois* between 20 and 22 May as first lieutenant (executive officer), Tony took on gunnery duties in addition to the executive officer’s traditional responsibility for the welfare of the men on board.¹²¹ If he was worried, he did not show it, writing in his first letter to Martha on 23 May, “Everything is going along quite splendidly – certainly as well as I expected and probably much better.”¹²²

Iroquois sailed for England on 1 June. In a letter on 4 June, Tony noted two differences between *Iroquois* and “old Chilliwack”: superior speed, and superior comfort.¹²³ While the refit in Canada had made *Iroquois* the best equipped of the five Canadian Tribals, its timing had one clear drawback. As Tony reported on 6 June, “Well the big show appears to be on now and I felt a little depressed. Displaying his trademark optimism, he continued, “however,

from John Harvey as Tony left *Resolution*. On the step up, CRC to MHC, Letter C129, Sunday, 19 March 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹¹⁹ On his apology, CRC to MHC, Letter I1, Tuesday, 23 May 1944, Coughlin Papers. On *Iroquois*’ refit, Douglas, Sarty, and Whitby, *Blue Water Navy*, 307.

¹²⁰ See Michael J. Whitby, “Matelots, Martinets, and Mutineers: The Mutiny in HMCS *Iroquois*, 19 July 1943,” *The Journal of Military History* 65, no. 1 (2001): 77-103, doi:10.2307/2677431.

¹²¹ Tony left Martha on the 20 May and wrote his first letter on the 23 May, in which he referenced being asked to dinner by Hibbard the night prior. Lieutenant Commander Alan Easton, DSC, MID, a professional sea officer of the RCNR and a renowned ship commander in the Atlantic war, described in his superb memoirs the duties of the executive officer as “working the seamen, the co-ordination of departments and the general co-operation of individuals so that harmony would endure, and discipline prevail,” Alan Easton, *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground*, ed. Michael Whitby (n.p.: Lewin of Greenwich Organization Ltd., 2021), 49.

¹²² CRC to MHC, Letter I1, Tuesday, 23 May 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹²³ CRC to MHC, Letter I5, Sunday, 4 June 1944, Coughlin Papers.

there is plenty of time yet. It certainly seems to be going splendidly. Boy it will be a wonderful affair to be in on.”¹²⁴ *Iroquois* arrived in Liverpool on 8 June to continue its refit – getting in on that affair would have to wait.

For the period from the Normandy landings on 6 June to 1 July, we only have two letters from Tony. While gaps in letter writing in the coming months seem to have stemmed from how busy he was (and perhaps on a couple of instances from Martha later removing them from the collection),¹²⁵ in this instance, it seems that letters were first delayed by the Normandy landings and then burned in a fire in London – as late as 27 July, fellow officer Lieutenant Jim Saks, RCNVR, had told Tony that his mother had not received a single letter, and Tony heard confirmation of the fire at about the same time.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, *Iroquois* was the only ship in which Tony did not number his letters, making parsing these effects very difficult.

The most interesting revelation of the May-June 1944 period come from the recollections of Tony’s shipmate in *Iroquois*’ wardroom, Lieutenant Commander Gordon Stead, RCNVR, recently published by the navy’s official historian, Michael Whitby. Stead describes challenging dynamics in the 1944 wardroom, which resulted from the additional officers carried (as in other Canadian Tribal class destroyers) to give “big ship” experience to members of the expanding officer corps in Canada’s almost entirely small-ship navy. Compounding these challenges were *Iroquois*’ officers’ unusually high qualifications, and the still-present whispers of the 1943 mutiny. Reflecting on the dynamic, Stead wrote to Whitby,

That the officer team worked as well as it did in this over-crowded topsy-turvy situation was to the credit of the good sense of this varied lot of individuals, although there was some tension. In the early stages of this commission when the tone was set, it was also to the credit of [First Lieutenant] Tony Coughlin who was a strong leader who unified the wardroom by his personality. In due course, after the actions in the Bay of Biscay had the effect of settling us in, I was able to report in a letter home that ‘things are better aboard here ... there is less

¹²⁴ CRC to MHC, Letter I6, Tuesday, 6 June 1944, Coughlin Papers. As the first of the Canadian Tribals launched, *Iroquois* was also the first in line for a refit, whose timing was of course unfortunate – but whose results later that summer would be spectacular.

¹²⁵ On the possible removals, while Martha and Tony both acknowledge his lack of letter writing in this period, she also specifically mentions a letter of 15 September we do not have, and it seems likely that Tony wrote after 11 October (the last available letter), but that she took the letter away from the collection. MHC to CRC, Letter M13, 25 September 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹²⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter I20, Thursday, 27 July 1944; and CRC to MHC, Letter I14, Friday, 21 July 1944, Coughlin Papers.

bickering.”¹²⁷

After the break in Tony’s letters, 1 July brought some return to the normal flow, although not the one-per-day schedule Tony had previously adhered to (and promised Martha on 1 June).¹²⁸ From 1 to 16 July, *Iroquois* participated in intensive harbour training and ten officers (probably including Tony) took radar and aircraft recognition courses.¹²⁹ On 11 July, the news regarding promotions began to filter through, as Tony reported that he had received “Fully Qualified



HMCS *Iroquois*. (Royal Canadian Navy)

Status,” as one of two (it was actually three) VR lieutenant commanders to achieve that level in the entire RCN.¹³⁰

Then, on 14 July, he got more good news – settling into his cabin for the night, he heard over the radio that he had been awarded the DSC for his role in the *U-744* sinking. As he told Martha, “well you could have knocked me over with a feather – I had absolutely no idea of it and was greatly surprised.”¹³¹ Upon hearing the news, the captain (who “seemed very pleased”) invited him in for a drink, and once joined by the officers from two other ships (including Debbie Piers’ *Algonquin*), “the officers stuck a great big piece of adhesive tape on my chest, coloured in blue and white [the colours of the ribbon for the DSC]

¹²⁷ Michael Whitby and Gordon Stead, “A Navy in Transition, Part 1,” *Starshell*, no. 90 (Fall 2020): 45, https://www.navalassoc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Starshell-October-Edition-2020_compressed.pdf.

¹²⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter I3, Thursday, 1 June 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹²⁹ J.C. Hibbard to Commodore (D) Home Fleet, “July Report of Proceedings,” 11 September 1944, RG24-D-1-C, vol. 34007, file 1926-DDE 217, LAC.

¹³⁰ CRC to MHC, Letter I12, Tuesday, 11 July 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹³¹ CRC to MHC, Letter I14, Friday, 14 July 1944, Coughlin Papers.

Lieutenant Commander Coughlin shares a cup of tea with his captain, Commander James "Jimmy" Hibbard. (*Canadian Geographical Journal*, November 1944)



and then sang for 'He's a jolly good fellow.'¹³²

From 16 to 31 July, *Iroquois* completed its work up in Scapa Flow. In late July, Tony began to indicate increased activity in the ship, describing twelve-hour shifts on the bridge, and later, noting that "this has without a doubt been the busiest period, I think, I have had since joining the navy."¹³³ Soon, the working up exercises were put to good use, as *Iroquois* began its part in Operation Kinetic sweeps tasked with clearing the Bay of Biscay and isolating German garrisons in Brittany.

Iroquois' first sweep proved eventful. In the earliest hours of the morning on 6 August, Force 26, comprised of *Iroquois*, fellow Tribals HMCS *Haida*, HM Ships *Ashanti*, and *Tartar*, and British cruiser HMS *Bellona*, intercepted a German convoy off Isle d'Yeu. Over the next hours, they engaged nearly all

¹³² In this letter, Tony changed his spelling of Piers' name, to feature two 'b's – joining the accepted historical convention. *Algonquin* was a V-Class destroyer transferred from the RN to the RCN upon its completion – not a Tribal, as the name might suggest; CRC to MHC, Letter I14, Friday, 14 July 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹³³ On the twelve-hour shifts, CRC to MHC, Letter I19, Thursday, 25 July 1944, Coughlin Papers. On his busyness, CRC to MHC, Letter I21, Wednesday, 2 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

its ships, including a trawler, five minesweepers, a cable layer, two coasters, and a merchant vessel, sinking six of the enemy vessels. Due to mist, poor communications, and better than expected opposing gunnery, later contact with four vessels was not nearly as successful, but Force 26's effectiveness in the early hours of the morning was notable. In addition to highlighting the role of *Iroquois*' AIO system, the official history, *A Blue Water Navy*, credits the destroyer's "usual high standard" of gunnery, which can be attributed to Tony's leadership.¹³⁴ *Iroquois* sank its first target within ten minutes of opening fire and of the action Hibbard wrote: "It is considered that a young and inexperienced ship's company went through their baptism of fire showing most commendable steady-ness such that the greatest possible use was made of the opportunity presented to achieve the object of destroying enemy ships."¹³⁵ The day after the action, Tony explained to Martha, "Had a very interesting experience last night. A little different from my DSC one and a type I had hoped to get. Wished I had had my own command though. It would then have been a little different." While the *Iroquois* escaped with no casualties, sleep was certainly sacrificed, as Tony told Martha in his letter later that day that he had gotten four hours of sleep in the last sixty-two.¹³⁶

On 11 August, Tony indicated that he had had similarly little sleep in another action of this "most amazing" new surface work.¹³⁷ Interestingly, the ship's report of proceedings – and historians – do not mention any action between the 6 and 14 August. While not the only possibility, the most likely explanation for this discrepancy is a dating error from Tony. In any case, in the same letter, Tony told Martha of the congratulatory notes he had received for his DSC (besides former shipmates, they included John Connolly, executive assistant to navy minister Angus L. Macdonald, and Canada's high commissioner in London, Vincent Massey, later governor general), and an interesting hint at his future: "It sure would be nice if your little 'thought' came true – a destroyer command, a trip through Panama and the West Coast, etc."¹³⁸

Around midnight on 15 August, *Iroquois* was in action again, in company

¹³⁴ Douglas, Sarty, and Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy*, 305.; Royal Canadian Navy, *The Navy List*, September 1944, shows Tony as the only officer on board with formal gunnery qualifications. His official commission also included gunnery duties.

¹³⁵ J.C. Hibbard, "Report of Action," 12 August 1944, RG24-D-1-C, vol. 34007, file 1926-DDE 217, LAC.

¹³⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter I22, Sunday, 6 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹³⁷ CRC to MHC, Letter I24, Friday, 11 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹³⁸ CRC to MHC, Letter I24, Friday, 11 August 1944, Coughlin Papers. The reference to the West Coast, while potentially reflective of domestic plans, would have been largely prompted by plans for the RCN to shift its efforts towards the defeat of Japan upon Germany's surrender. Such efforts would have been based, in Canada, out of Esquimalt.



Wardroom, HMCS *Iroquois*. Tony is in the middle of the back row. (Coughlin Papers)

with the destroyer HMS *Ursa* and cruiser HMS *Mauritius*, against three German ships, including the destroyer *T-24*. Evading *T-24*'s torpedoes but failing to destroy it in return, *Iroquois* and *Ursa* engaged smaller vessels for the rest of the night, sinking a minesweeper and driving four other vessels aground, avoiding significant shore battery fire while doing so. As they finished off two of those beached ships, Tony told his men, "Be prepared for anything. We are going in for the kill. Take your time and take it easy. We will sink the enemy."¹³⁹ *T-24*, in what was becoming a pattern of skill and good luck, escaped, despite being hit by *Iroquois*.¹⁴⁰ On 18 August, Tony referred to the action as "the best one yet."¹⁴¹

On 20 August, *Mauritius*, *Ursa*, and *Iroquois* began patrols once again, engaging German vessels on the morning of 23 August. Initially destroying three patrol boats, *Ursa* and *Iroquois* then turned their sights on some flak

¹³⁹ Sub Lieutenant Frank Healy, "HMCS *Iroquois* in Hot Encounter Twice in Week Off St. Nazaire Port," *The Evening Citizen*, 18 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁴⁰ J.C. Hibbard, "Report of Action," 17 August 1944, RG24-D-13, vol. 11731, file CS 151-13-7, LAC; and Douglas, Sarty, & Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy*, 312.

¹⁴¹ CRC to MHC, Letter I27, Friday, 18 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

trawlers, raising the tally to a total of six ships sunk and the side effect of rendering their guns too hot to use upon their return.¹⁴² The ships' three commanders each received awards following the action, DSCs and DSOs, according to their seniority, as did *Iroquois*' navigator. Tony would receive a Mention in Despatches (what he had initially thought he would receive for the *U-744* sinking), although he would not live to hear the news.¹⁴³ Of the action, Hibbard wrote, "The ship's company were very steady and conducted themselves with credit. Particularly noticeable in this action was the high standard shown by the Action Information Centre Team and the radar operating and maintenance personnel. . . . The Guns functioned most satisfactorily . . . and as far as is known no mistakes were made."¹⁴⁴

Returning to harbour briefly on 24 August, *Iroquois* would sail again shortly thereafter, and on 26 August sent a landing party to provide supplies and establish communications on the French Isle D'Yeu, which the Germans had recently evacuated. Similar landings took place on the mainland, at Pointe de Penmarche, the following day.¹⁴⁵ While Lieutenant Saks commanded the party at Isle D'Yeu on 26 August, Tony joined him on the mainland the next day, writing, "I have touched a shore where I never was before – strictly business too. I am sure it would all surprise you. Got a Free French Flag as a souvenir for you."¹⁴⁶ These missions were primarily intelligence gathering missions, putting Allied forces in touch with the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), gathering information on German positions and defences, ascertaining the needs of the FFI, and establishing communications links with the mainland.¹⁴⁷ In 1983, Hibbard remembered that "the welcome of the French people was unbelievable."¹⁴⁸

The final highlight of *Iroquois*' time in the Bay of Biscay would come when the ship escorted Winston Churchill, in RMS *Queen Mary*, part of the way to the Quebec conference in early September. As Ted Doyle, a radar operator aboard *Iroquois* remembered, keeping pace with the enormous liner was a challenge, as it cut through the seas more easily than the pitching hull

¹⁴² Douglas, Sarty, & Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy*, 316.

¹⁴³ *Canada Gazette*, vol. 79, no. 3, Regular Issue (20 January 1945): 98.

¹⁴⁴ J.C. Hibbard, "Report of Action," 28 August 1944, RG24-D-13, vol. 11731, file CS 151-13-7, LAC.

¹⁴⁵ National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History, "A Brief History of HMCS *Iroquois*," updated to 31 January 1972, http://jproc.ca/iroquois/brief_history.html.

¹⁴⁶ CRC to MHC, Letter I31, Monday, 18 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁴⁷ J.C. Hibbard, "Report on Landing at Ile D'Yeu," 29 August 1944, RG24-D-1-C, vol. 34007, file 1926-DDE 217, LAC.

¹⁴⁸ Hibbard to Bell, "My Navy Recollections," 1983.

of the destroyer.¹⁴⁹ During this period Tony received his flimsy from captain (D) Newfoundland for his time in command of *Chilliwack*, assessing it, “quite good I think but brief of course.” It read, “To my entire satisfaction and with great zeal, ability, and success as a commanding officer.”¹⁵⁰

In the remainder of September, Hibbard later remembered “masses of jobs to do of one sort or another,” including escorting heavy units of the fleet.¹⁵¹ In late September, *Iroquois* landed armed parties twice again at Isle d’Yeu, as well as Les Sables d’Olonne, a seaside town on the French mainland. Tony was a member of the first party to land at Les Sables D’Olonne on 23 September, alongside *Iroquois*’ Lieutenants Scrivener and Saks.¹⁵²

Regardless of the mission, Tony seems to have brought his trademark indefatigable energy to *Iroquois*, and in applying the same skills that had made him respected in *Resolution* and *Chilliwack*, made an outstanding executive officer. While Tony was never one to boast about himself (other than to Martha), his shipmates were clearly impressed. For example, Stead was not complimentary in comparing the leadership and “officer-like qualities” of the RCN’s regular officers to those of the RN. By contrast, the VRs, “especially my friend [Lieutenant] Max Heayberd with his RN upbringing, but also [Lieutenants] Saks and Seagram, were closer to the mark, as, most certainly, was Coughlin.”¹⁵³ In summarizing his thoughts on Tony, Stead described him as “a hard act to follow” and “a strong, well-rounded personality, enthusiastic and vigorous.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly, nearly fifty years after the war, *Iroquois*’ chief bosun’s mate wrote Martha that “Tony Coughlin was one of the finest men I have ever sailed with.... He was so popular and well-liked by the whole ships company.”¹⁵⁵

That letter, of course, was in the past tense. On 20 October 1944, Martha received a letter that changed everything. It was from the secretary of the Naval Board, Joseph Jeffrey, and read in part:

I regret to inform you that the Department has received information that your husband, Lieutenant-Commander Clifton Rexford Coughlin,

¹⁴⁹ Directorate of History, “A Brief History of HMCS *Iroquois*.”

¹⁵⁰ Captain (D) Newfoundland was Commander James N. Rowland, DSO, RN. Tony relayed the note in CRC to MHC, Letter I27, Friday, 18 August 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁵¹ Hibbard to Bell, “My Navy Recollections,” 1983.

¹⁵² J.C. Hibbard to Commander-in-Chief Plymouth, “Intelligence Obtained at Les Sables D’Olonne,” 3 October 1944, RG24-D-1-C, vol. 34007, file 1926-DDE 217, LAC.

¹⁵³ Whitby & Stead, “Navy in Transition Part 1,” 46.

¹⁵⁴ Michael Whitby and Gordon Stead, “A Navy in Transition, Part 2,” *Starshell*, no. 91 (Fall 2020): 53, <https://www.navalassoc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Starshell-February-Edition-LR.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ CM to MHC, February 1993, Coughlin Papers.



Commander James “Jimmy” Hibbard at Tony Coughlin’s grave. (Coughlin Papers)

DSC, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, has been placed on the Dangerous Case list overseas. According to the report received your husband is dangerously ill, suffering from a fractured left femur, (thigh bone), received on board his ship during heavy seas. A complication of pulmonary oedema (fluid in the lung), has now set in.¹⁵⁶

By the time Martha received the letter – indeed, by the time it was written – Tony was dead. He died on 19 October 1944, three days after an injury sustained not at the hand of the enemy, but by the sea, as *Iroquois* was shifting from Plymouth to operate out of Scapa Flow. A subsequent board of inquiry’s investigation into his death produced the following description of the accident.

Lieutenant-Commander Coughlin had reported rounds to the Captain in sea cabin, at about 20:15. In accordance with his usual custom, he then went into the Plot to look at the Cypher Log, and then went aft. The Depth Charge Sentry, who was in the after canopy, saw him go into the after superstructure. About two minutes later Lieutenant-Commander Coughlin came out of the superstructure and turned to go forward on the starboard side (the lee side). Almost immediately, the

¹⁵⁶ Secretary of the Naval Board to MHC, 20 October 1944, Coughlin Papers.

ship took the heavy roll referred to above, and the Depth Charge Sentry heard a cry for help. He and his mate found Lieutenant-Commander Coughlin lying on the deck, with his left leg entangled in the gangway stanchion.¹⁵⁷

After a night spent in immense pain – *Iroquois*' medical officer J.M. Murray reported that he had administered sodium pentothal, "the patient not having been noticeably affected by the original dose of morphine" – Tony was transferred to the Royal Naval Hospital, Northness, where he died at 9:30 pm three days after his initial injury. The board of inquiry found that the ship was handled in a seamanlike manner, that there was no reason to prohibit passage along the upper deck, and that every medical precaution was taken, so concluded finally that "we are of the opinion that this most unfortunate accident was caused by the ordinary hazards of seafaring." They finished their report by noting that "the Board would like to record its deep sympathy ... for the loss of an officer, known to the President of the Board [Captain Godfrey N. Brewer, RN, captain (D) Sixth Destroyer Flotilla], not only as being a most zealous and efficient officer, but also as a mess-mate of outstanding personal charm."¹⁵⁸

After a decorated, successful, and impactful naval career, and all the indications for future success, Tony did not live to see the war's final year. His remarkable rise through the RCN interrupted, he now lies at Lyness Naval Cemetery on Hoy, Orkney. His funeral in Scapa Flow was attended by the ship's company of *Iroquois*, Lieutenant Commander Debbie Piers, who sailed with him in *Assiniboine* on his first day at sea, Lieutenant Commander Eric Boak of HMCS *Sioux*, and Commodore R.M.J. Hutton, Commodore (D) of the British Home Fleet. His pall bearers were the division chiefs of *Iroquois*.¹⁵⁹ In Ottawa, the service in Tony's memory was attended by naval minister Angus L. Macdonald, chief of the naval staff Rear-Admiral G.C. Jones, and Lieutenant Commander Herbert Rayner (lately in command of HMCS *Huron* and a future chief of the naval staff).¹⁶⁰ In his letter to Martha two days after Tony's death (included as an appendix), Hibbard told her, "I loved Tony and shall always be proud to look upon him as one of my greatest friends. He possessed everything that is finest in life. He was a born leader and had the highest ideals and

¹⁵⁷ Captain Godfrey N. Brewer, Lieutenant Commander, Edward Copson, Temporary Surgeon, Lieutenant John Cedric Jones, "Minutes of a Board of Enquiry....," 23 October 1944, R112, vol. 30479, item 43966, LAC.

¹⁵⁸ Brewer, Copson, & Jones, "Minutes," 1944.

¹⁵⁹ "Brother Officers at Service for 'Tony' Coughlin," *Ottawa Citizen*, 1944, Coughlin Papers.

¹⁶⁰ "Memorial Service in tribute to Lt. Cmdr. Coughlin," *Ottawa Citizen*, 1944, Coughlin Papers.

principles and lived up to them.”¹⁶¹ True to his word, Hibbard still lamented Tony’s loss when recalling his time in *Iroquois* forty years later.¹⁶²

Martha, without the centre of so many of her plans and hopes, would nonetheless move forward with the intelligence Tony never failed to compliment. She rose to be the highest-ranking woman at MetLife in Canada, leaving only when told she would not be promoted any further due to her gender. She never remarried nor even removed her wedding band, and made ten trips to his gravesite in Scotland over the course of her life. She also returned to New York every year to celebrate New Year’s Eve, where they had spent it together as newlyweds in 1939-40. Sometimes, she would re-read the letters that formed the basis of this article.

Tony is now almost forgotten in Canada’s naval history. The Naval Prayer – an element of naval tradition throughout the Commonwealth, which Tony, deeply religious, certainly would have known – reads in part, “Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy.” By October 1944, Tony had survived the best efforts of the *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe*. Unlike the German war machine, however, the dangers of the sea were unrelenting. He was 31.

A graduate of Queen’s University, David Niddam-Dent is now a master’s student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is Tony Coughlin’s great-nephew and was President of Queen’s Arts & Science student government in 2020, 84 years after Coughlin held the same position.

Appendix A: Unsent Letter, Wednesday, 7 May 1941

My dear dear wife,

It is now a quarter to eleven and in about another hour and three quarters we shall know whether or not we are going to be blitzed again. He usually comes over now around 12:30am – it is bright right up until midnight. Last night was really terrific – the night before not quite so bad.

I have just written you the daily letter, but am writing again just in case, my dear wife, my dear dear wife, I don’t see the light of day again. Amazing as it may sound, I haven’t got even the slightest notion of fear – I don’t think. Rather, it is a case of facing the facts and being ready for the realities. It is you, my sweet, who has given me this courage and feeling of fortitude; a steady process of strengthening of character, since the day we first started going together

¹⁶¹ Jimmy Hibbard to MHC, 21 October 1944

¹⁶² Hibbard to Bell, “My Navy Recollections,” 1983.

– and what a glorious and wonderful occasion that was for me.

The mere thought of you, fills me with high ideals, noble thoughts, truth and virtue, enthusiasm, ambition, and zeal. It is for you my dear, that I would gladly die, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing that I wouldn't do for you as long as I am living.

Two nights ago the Hun came over and for the first hour or more, dropped incendiaries and HE in large quantities, but on the wrong side of this famous and beloved Scottish river. However, he soon realized his mistake – since the incendiaries did not start the large fires they would do in much “buildinged” section.

Flares were dropped in large numbers – calcium ones I think – to light up the countryside below. Our machine guns rattled off hundreds of rounds, perhaps thousands, mixed with brilliant tracer – about 1 in 4 – at these beacons of destruction in order to break them up and thus cause them to die out and fall faster. The tracer – with its bright red glow made quite a spectacle along with the flares which changed the night into daylight. The next wave came over and dropped incendiaries and high explosive bombs causing many fires.

The bombs – HE – do not have such a demoralizing effect as one would be prone to think. As they come down – spinning through the air – a whistling sound is produced, very similar to that of a fire chief's siren. And so with that warning note – we dive to the deck and hope for the best. The loudness of the whistle – to the seasoned ear – lets one know the rough proximity of the bomb before it actually lands. I got quite used to these in Portsmouth and so had that much of an advantage on the other lads. But land mines are different and really devastating. They are brought down by parachute and produce no whistling sound. The only warning they give is a slight fluttering noise which is only audible at a distance far far too close for safety. Their blast is outwards, rather than upwards, as in the case of HE, and flattens buildings for great areas around – the size demolished being dependent upon the type of structure. In Portsmouth, for instance, I saw a section of about 2 city blocks square made utterly uninhabitable and great property damage, while up here one landing in a large concrete building would merely blow it to bits.

But now to get back to this raid of the other night. We are in the unfortunate position of being in drydock, with no ammunition aboard, and no means of generating our own power since water is necessary for the boilers which generate the necessary electricity – a rather helpless situation all in all.

I was duty and the first indication of an air raid being imminent was the lights going out – the switch being broken in the dockyard office. Then the sirens went, followed a few minutes later by the throttling sound of German planes. I went up on deck and saw that everything was in order – sandbags for incendiaries and so on.

Then the HE started falling mostly on one side of us only. Whenever I

would hear the whistling sound of a bomb I would shout "Take cover" or "lie down" – the latter is much the better. I have seen ever so many shelters blown to bits by the blast of bombs and the people in them killed, whereas people within as close as 10 yds from the section where the bomb hit – if it was in the open – lying flat, come out unscathed. The explosion as I have mentioned before, being upwards. At Whale Island, one HE landed on the lawn within 20 yds of the 3" gun and not one person was even scratched. Merely because they fell flat on the ground. I feel much safer in the open.

All the time the bombs were falling I had no thought of fear, but merely that if I was going to get it I would get it. Nothing landed within 30 yards of the ship that night and I turned in around 4:30 Am.

I gave some of the ratings permission after the all clear went – to go outside the dockyard to help about the city. It was pretty badly hit but nothing to what was to come the following night. They succeeded in pulling a number of people out of ruins and lending a hand with the dead.

Last night, however, the Hun wasted no time in locating his target, and started dropping flares incendiaries and HE all at once. The explosions were terrific and fires started everywhere. The whole sky-lane was a flaming inferno and bombs dropped continually and much much closer to the ship. I couldn't count the number of times the ship shuddered.

Some of the lads stayed below but I preferred to be on deck to lend a hand. Things got pretty hot and incendiaries started dropping on the ship and about the dockyard. We rushed madly about with sandbags trying to extinguish them and did so quite effectively. They really are very easy to handle once you know how. All this time HE were being dropped and fires were everywhere. The sky was literally filled with flares.

By this time I had lost any previous desire that I might have had to go below save for the occasional trip to have a few words with the lads who were there.

As I said before fires were very prevalent all about us and the ship and cranes and other steel structures of the dockyard stood out like huge pillars against the sky. We sent one lad out to try to muster a fire wagon in order to fight the fires and he had almost immediate success. The fire-watchers in the dockyard were either numberless or else had taken cover in the shelters. They were nowhere to be seen at all.

It was not until about 4:30am that the raiders left us – and from the time the alert went there was no let up at all in the severe pounding that we were taking. In Portsmouth, my first experience of a blitz, lasted from 9:30pm until 5am but I don't think it was as severe. There the planes came over in waves at about 10 or 15 minute intervals. One would come over drop bombs and flares to get the next wave – or incendiaries if they were using them on that occasion.

After the raiders had left us Debie P, Panner B and myself went out to see just what the city looked like. I fear I shall not have the time now to describe it fully but to suffice I shall say it would be impossible to imagine without being actually on the scene and experiencing it. Everyplace seem to be ablaze. Debris of all kinds, broken glass, brick mortar and steel filled the streets, People were wandering about with drawn faces, the worldly wealth, in some cases, merely the clothes they wore.

The AFS (Auxil Fire Service) were wonderful – fighting fires in the midst of the heavy bombing that had taken place and working for hours and hours without so much as stopping for a cigarette.

As far as we could see, there were fires and demolished buildings. As we walked through the streets Debie stumbled over an object, which on glancing closer we discovered was the torso of a woman, the legs severed at the thigh lying on either side, one breast bared. The arms or head did not appear to be around. Close-by was another prostrate body.

A little farther on we came to a spot where a man was vainly trying to ascertain whether his sister and brother were dead or alive under the twisted ruins of what was once their home.

As we strolled along, broken glass crunching under our feet, cinders and sparks from fires filling the air, fire hoses making a rather drunken grid over the cobbled-stone street, I picked up an incendiary, the fuze of which had gone off, but the flash having failed to penetrate the passage to the magazine of magnesium, that terrifically inflammable metal which has caused so much destruction in fires during this war. On examining it closer the date of its manufacture – 1936 – stood out. Five years ago, while the rest of the world was dreaming along in a coma of pacifist idealism – Germany with Hitler at its ever growing head was preparing for its all-conquering war – for its new order in Europe – its conquest by force – and the suppression of the weak. This was proof enough. I put the incendiary in my pocket. Tomorrow I would defuse it and render it safe – a souvenir which I would take to Canada if I lived that long. As we wandered up the main street – every part of which was ablaze or else demolished – I thanked God from the bottom of my soul for seeing us through the night – one more night closer to the time –if I were spared – when I should rejoin my dear wife – and live the peaceful life I am sure we were meant to lead – after so many years – 9 in all to date – of being more or less separated primarily because I was at college for four of those years – 3 more because of the exigencies of the economic system in which we live and the standard of living I should want her and my children to have and the remaining time because of present chaos in which we found ourselves involved. They have indeed been trying times – but times in the sense of two lives – based on the high and noble ideals of my wife – and made – from a purely personal point

of view – wonderful because of that.

I have heard it said that a man is as good or as bad as a woman he loves – and of that I am firmly convinced. It is now just about 1am and so we shall have a quiet night “the night in.” Last night I turned in at 12 hoping not to bother with the raid – I felt certain we were [not] to have one since the sky was clear and the moon bright – but scarcely had the bombs started to drop when I was convinced that “we were for it” and that sleep would be impossible.

Appendix B: Jimmy Hibbard Letter to Martha Coughlin, 21 October 1944

My Dear Martha,

I have been thinking of you such a lot and I can't tell you how badly we all feel over the loss of our most loved and favourite shipmate.

Tony was with me in my Sea Cabin between eight and eight-thirty PM. We were talking and laughing together and he was in very good form – he then went to the Plotting Room to read the signals and started to go aft at about 9 PM. It was rough with a following sea. On his way aft the ship took an unusually big roll and Tony was taken right off his feet and knocked against the guard rail near the after gun. His leg caught on the stanchion. The sentry was on the spot and gave the alarm and it was a matter of seconds before the ship was stopped and the doctor was with him. I came aft and talked to Tony. His leg was hurting him but he was very brave – he smoked a cigarette – and said he was sorry. He was the only other officer in the ship who knew where we were going and why. He implored me not to delay the ship when he realized we had reduced speed and gone onto another course to keep the ship steady while getting him comfortable.

The doctor never left him and did everything in his power to see Tony was well looked after. He was taken to the hospital the next morning and it was about twelve hours later he took a turn for the worse. I went to see him the next day but I am afraid this time he was unconscious and he passed away quietly that night. He suffered very little.

Martha, your loss is great and please believe me when I tell you I too join in your sorrow.

I loved Tony and shall always be proud to look upon him as one of my greatest friends. He possessed everything that is finest in life. He was a born leader and had the highest ideals and principles and lived up to them. His great cheerfulness and efficiency made him an inspiration to everyone. Tony died fighting this war as hard as almost anyone and he was happy to be doing it. Tony is a tremendous loss to the Service and to everyone who knew him.

The funeral is at 3pm tomorrow, Sunday, conducted by the Reverend

Clifford Davis, who was with Tony at the end. All his shipmates will be there and also many from Piers' and Boak's ships among others. Mr. Davis is writing to you tomorrow.

Martha, you are in my thoughts almost constantly and nothing I can say can really tell you how we all feel – a gloom has come over the whole ship.

Very sincerely,
Jimmy Hibbard