

A Casualty of the Invasion: H.M.C.S Regina

For the first eight months of her service life, Regina was with the Halifax and Western Local Escort Forces. In September with seventeen other Canadian corvettes she joined in Operation Torch, escorting convoys to North Africa in support of the forces fighting there. Her success in destroying the Italian submarine Avorio has been previously discussed.

In March 1943 she returned to Canada, where many of her ship's company were replaced during a refit. Her new commanding officer, Lt Jack Radford, RCNR, joined her in September. In February, 1944 she was assigned to C-I Escort Group. By March the build-up for the planned invasion of Europe necessitated additional escorts in UK waters so Regina returned to England and Western Approaches Command to escort local convoys in the Channel area.

Most convoys were formed up in two main collecting areas. The Thames estuary served the eastern side of the British Isles, and the Bristol Channel ports the west. From there they moved into the assembly areas, thence to the invasion beaches or small ports as they were captured and cleared. The Canadian corvettes were extremely busy from early May throughout the summer, always on call, making frequent trips to the Normandy area.

For the bridge personnel it was a type of duty unlike the Atlantic or Mediterranean convoys that had been their principal experiences to date. This time they often had large convoys that could travel only when passages through the minefields had been swept and marked. Precise navigation was vital. In addition to the mines there were constant and variable threats of U-boats, E-boats and air attack, including glider bombs.

Regina was the sole escort for the west coast convoy EBC-66 of ten ships in two columns. Proceeding southwesterly along the north coast of Cornwall on a clear, calm night of 8 August, 1944, Regina was carrying out a broad zig-zag sweep from ahead of the starboard column to ahead of the port. At about 2130, when some eight miles from Trevoze Head, Lt Radford was on his bridge when an explosion was heard. He saw steam coming from the 7,200-ton US Liberty ship Ezra Weston, third ship in the starboard column, so closed her to investigate.

The master of the Ezra Weston signalled that he had hit a mine forward. Radford later estimated that the merchantman was slightly outside the swept channel, so mining was a consideration. This was to some extent a critical misapprehension that had an effect on Regina's later fate. Radford could see that the ship's back was broken so advised the master to try to beach his ship on the shore near Padstow, the nearest port, about seven miles off. HM LCT 644 (a Landing Craft, Tank) was in the convoy as the last ship in the port column. SLt L.G. Read, RNVR, the captain of the LCT, turned toward the stricken ship and arrived near her about the same time as Regina. Read was told to go alongside the merchant ship's starboard side. The master had by now decided to get his crew off the evidently sinking vessel and they went aboard the LCT with their personal gear in suitcases. This took almost an hour, while the possibility of saving some of her deck cargo of vehicles was discussed with the master and chief engineer. This was not

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practical as by then there was no steam to operate winches so the LCT drew clear. The master and three officers stayed on board the merchantman.

Regina remained idling in the vicinity of the Ezra Weston throughout this whole period. The merchant ship was moving slowly ahead for about half an hour but then stopped. Regina used her engines only to stay within hailing distance.

Read in the LCT decided to try to tow the Ezra Weston stern-first to shallower water and had actually started to take the strain on the manila tow line when Regina was hit by a torpedo at 2248, when she was just 200 to 300 feet from the LCT. At the time, no-one knew whether it was "another" mine or a torpedo. The resulting explosion sank the corvette in seconds. Most of the ship's company not on watch below had been on the upper deck watching the towing operation and the men were thrown, jumped or were simply washed overboard into the water. AB T.D.H. Malone had set the depth charges to "safe" before the ship was struck and this action undoubtedly saved many lives. But he himself was not one of the survivors. Malone received no official recognition for doing his duty but he is remembered with gratitude by those who were rescued. In other rapid sinkings many Canadian sailors were lost while they were in the water, through the explosion of depth charges of foundering ships.

Thirty of the crew were killed on board or drowned in the immediate aftermath as the ship reared up and sank stem first. Some of those died later from their injuries. Most of those killed on board were engine and boiler room personnel. The sixty-six survivors from Regina and the four officers who had remained aboard the Ezra Weston until she broke in two and also sank were rescued by the LCT, assisted by HM Trawler Jacques Morgand which was in the vicinity, but there were serious injuries. The survivors had been in the water for only about thirty minutes but were covered in bunker fuel oil. The rescue operation was carried out with skill and gallantry by SLt Read and his small crew, considering they had no asdic or anti-submarine weapons. Regina's medical officer, Surgeon Lieutenant Grant A. Gould, RCNVR, was rescued but was in shock and choking on fuel oil. Some medical supplies had been brought from the Ezra Weston with her survivors and, after first recovering with a morphine shot, Surg. Lt Gould spent the night attending to the wounded, assisted by his own LSBA Bill Oneschuk, also among the survivors. His work included a leg amputation of ERA Lionel Racker who had joined the ship just that morning. Gould's surgery was the small quarterdeck of the LCT lit by flashlights, his scalpel a sterilized carving knife and the anaesthetic a few ounces of brandy. Gould and Oneschuk were awarded Mentions in Dispatches for their heroic work under very difficult circumstances, and Racker survived his ordeal. It is interesting to note that in a post-war (1945) article Dr. Gould concluded that the injuries "were of the type typically found in torpedoed vessel survivors. There was an absence of compression fractures associated with mined vessels."

The customary Board of Inquiry was held immediately after the sinking of Regina and its report rendered on 12 August. The Board focused much attention on trying to determine the still unidentified cause of the sinkings and positions of the three participants relative to each other. The Regina survivors questioned could not even be entirely sure that the explosion was on the port side though most thought so. The Board did not conclude whether Regina was sunk by a mine or a torpedo. Certainly she had no indication of a

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submarine on her asdic but she had also searched unsuccessfully for mines with the asdic short transmission unit.

When the master of the Ezra Weston told Radford that his ship was mined, it certainly contributed to the loss of Regina. His assumption was probably based only on negative evidence: no sighting of either a U-boat or a torpedo track. Had Radford considered the presence of a U-boat it is doubtful that he would have stopped his ship near the sinking merchantman, or even reduced his speed. His unprotected convoy had continued and he was not formally criticized for leaving them. But by remaining stopped, he was considered by the Naval Board, many months later, to have made a grave error. The RN director of anti-submarine warfare division also noted Regina's Co had erred in presuming the danger was from mines and that he had left his convoy unescorted.

LCT 644 took the wounded and oil-soaked survivors to Padstow harbour where they were taken off by an RAF crash boat, the Sir William Hillary (the ex-Dover RNLI lifeboat), the Padstow RNLI lifeboat Princess Mary and other small boats. The Padstow RNLI staff were puzzled and somewhat annoyed that they had not been called out for the rescue itself. Surg Lt Gould later mentioned that due to the low tide, some of the wounded had to be carried the last 100 yards to shore through mud and shallow water. Two had died on board the LCT from severe head wounds.

Regina's and Ezra Weston's antagonist was U 667, commanded by KL Karl-Heinz Lange, although this was not discovered until German records could be searched post-war. She had not had a very distinguished career since her launching in 1942: by the spring of 1944 she had not recorded a single successful attack. In May, 1944, under KL Heinrich Schroeteler, U 667 had been one of the early boats fitted with schnorkel, allowing air to be drawn into the submarine while remaining submerged, permitting boats to run on their diesels, saving battery power. He had sunk Regina with a GNAT.

Lange scored again six days later, sinking the American LST 921 and LCI(L) 99 out of convoy EBC-72, but he did not return to his home port, as U667 struck a mine off La Pallice, France eleven days later and was lost with all hands.

A touching aftermath to the loss of Regina is in the 1985 story of Mr. and Mrs. Ivor Jenkins of Bideford, Cornwall. When they came across the badly neglected graves of Regina casualties AB T.D.H. Malone, Sto 1 A.E. Dawson and Sto P0 W.J. Cramp in the churchyard of Poundstock St. Neots, they took it upon themselves to restore and care for the graves. They have since added two other Reginas to their charge, SA J.G.M. Rathbone and AB J.M. Saulnier, buried in St. Merryn Naval Cemetery near Padstow.

A new and very powerful Canadian Patrol Frigate has been named HMCS Regina, perpetuating the memory of the lost corvette. Several of the latter's survivors attended the commissioning of the new vessel in the spring of 1995, fifty-one years after their rescue.

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LOST:

Arkell, Joseph W., AB
Asselton, J. Derek, L.Tel
Beaton, Neil K., AB
Blain, Ronald G., AB
Burrows, Ernest D., Sto
Cramp, William J., StoPO
Dawson, Alfred E., Sto
Denoncourt, Charles O., L.Sto
East, Richard G., AB
Ferron, Kenneth M., Sto
Harrison, Robert M., AB
Helis, Joseph F., ERA
Loney, Donald C., Sto
Lovell, Alec S.M., Sto
Lusty, Frank O., AB
Malone, Thomas de la H., AB
McCarron, Francis J., AB
Moore, Harold B., LS
Pound, Francis J., AB
Rathbone, John G.M., SA
Robertson, Douglas P., StoPO
Rodseth, John N., AB
Rutter, James A., Coder
Saulnier, Joseph M., AB
Simpson, Frederick W., AB
Smith, Adam J., AB
Sutherland, Robert, Tel
Swalm, Charles H., Lt
Taylor, Albert D., Tel
Thompson, John, Cook
AB Robert Harrison (R.I.P.)
AB Joseph Saulnier (R.I.P.)



Sources

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Gould, *The Journal of the Canadian Medical Services*, November, 1945.
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Paquette & Bainbridge, *Honours & Awards*, pp. 210, 416, 479.
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**SINKING OF HMCS REGINA & THE LIBERTY SHIP EZRA WESTON
8TH AUGUST 1944 – FROM THE DOCUMENTARY *DEEP WRECK MYSTERIES*,
GOVERNMENT OF CANADA 2006, NORTHERN ENTERTAINMENT**

Thomas De La Haye Malone aged 30 years, died defusing the depth charges on
H.M.C.S. Regina

Both ships sank near Padstow, Cornwall.

J.W. Radford (d. 1991) was Lieutenant captaining (K-234)

Sixty-six survivors from H.M.C.S. Regina, 30 lost, only five bodies recovered. Two are
buried in the churchyard at St. Merryn, near Padstow Cornwall, three others at
Poundstock St. Neots, near Bude, Cornwall.

Amongst survivors interviewed:

Able Seaman Archie Marsh

Grant Gould Surgeon-Lieutenant

George Mann

U667 was the inshore U-Boat that sank both ships

See: Deep Wreck Mysteries, Government of Canada 2006, Northern Entertainment