

HIGHLIGHTS OF OPERATIONS OF HMC SHIPS BASED ON  
THE WEST COAST OF CANADA DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In August of 1939 the Royal Canadian Navy had the following vessels based upon the West Coast:

- Destroyers: HMC Ships ST.LAURENT, FRASER, OTTAWA, and RESTIGOUCHE;
- Minesweepers: HMC Ships ARMENTIERES, COMOX, and NOOTKA; and the
- Motor vessel HMCS SKIDEGATE.

When the outbreak of war with Germany became imminent it was considered that Canada's East Coast would require the greater protection and the ST. LAURENT and FRASER sailed for Halifax 31 August 1939. OTTAWA and RESTIGOUCHE engaged in patrolling the West Coast and carrying out local escort work until early in October when they were taken in hand at Esquimalt for refit before leaving for Halifax. They sailed for Halifax on 15 November 1939.

".....H.M.C. ships NOOTKA and COMOX remained on minesweeping duty at Esquimalt, while the ARMENTIERES was being used temporarily as an examination vessel at York Island, and seven additional vessels were requisitioned for examination services at the principal western ports. The SKIDEGATE took up harbour duties at Esquimalt, and ten Fishermen's Reserve vessels were at once assigned to patrol duties: four of them in the areas off Esquimalt, another four in the vicinity of the Queen Charlotte Islands, and two on the west coast of Vancouver Island." (1)

Thus, Canadian vessels on the West Coast began their participation in the war. Naval activity on this coast was, for the most part, limited throughout the war to patrol

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1. Gilbert Norman Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada, Ottawa, 1952, Vol. II, p.9. This work, along with Joseph Schull's The Far Distant Ships, Ottawa, 1952, is the major source from which the material for this brief summary has been derived.

activity.<sup>1</sup> These patrols were carried out to a large extent by the little vessels of the Fishermen's Reserve. Naval construction on the West Coast provided other vessels but these were needed for the Atlantic convoy routes and with but few exceptions left for Halifax when they were completed. However, the corvettes HMCS VANCOUVER and HMCS DAWSON, built on the West Coast, were upon commissioning based on Esquimalt and from 1942 to early in 1944 carried out important duties. Besides these, the Armed Merchant Cruiser HMCS PRINCE ROBERT was commissioned for service on the West Coast in September 1940. She was joined there by her sister ships HMCS PRINCE HENRY and HMCS PRINCE DAVID in 1942.

The following tables indicate the type and number of vessels based on Esquimalt and Prince Rupert from January 1942 to May 1945:

"R.C.N. Warships Based on Esquimalt From January 1942 -May 1945.

(Taken from statements on Allocation of HM, HMC, and Allied Warships to Canadian Forces, in NS 1057-3-6 series)

Date	Jan. 42 <sup>x</sup>	June 42 <sup>x</sup>	Jan. 43	June 43	Jan. 44	June 44	Jan. 45	May 45
Aux. Cruisers..	2	3	3	..	..	..	..	..
Corvettes.....	3	7	2	..	2	3	4	4
Bangor M/S.....	5	13	8	5	5	5	4	4
105' Motor M/S.	..	..	..	..	..	..	4	4
M.L.'s.....	..	6	6	6	6	6	9	9
Armed Yachts...	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
Total.....	13	31	20	12	15	15	22	23

<sup>x</sup>During 1942 the Pacific Coast Allocations were grouped together."<sup>2</sup>

1. The Exceptions to this routine of patrol duty--HMCS PRINCE ROBERT's capture of the German merchantman WESER and the participation of Canadian ships with American forces in operations in the Aleutians--constitute the "highlights" of the naval war on the West Coast and are noted in the attached appendices for the individual ships involved.

2. Tucker, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 229.



"R.C.N. Warships Based on Prince Rupert January 1943-May 1945

(From statements on Allocation of HM, HMC, and Allied Warships to Canadian Forces, in NS 1057-3-6 series)

Date	Jan. 43	June 43	Jan. 44	June 44	Jan 45	May 45
Bangor M/S.....	5	3	2	2	3	3
105' Motor M/S.	..	..	..	..	4	4
M.L.'s.....	..	..	..	..	3	3
Armed Yachts...	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	..	..
Total	6	4	3	3	10	10 " 1.

The most important naval action of the war in this area took place in the Aleutians.

"In June 1942 the Japanese leap across the Pacific to occupy Attu and Kiska had posed the threat of a serious attack by way of the Northwest. Strong American naval forces had moved into Alaskan waters; and on August 20th the three Canadian armed merchant cruisers, PRINCE ROBERT, PRINCE HENRY and PRINCE DAVID, together with the corvettes DAWSON and VANCOUVER, had also sailed from Esquimalt for Kodiak. There, operating under the orders of the United States Navy (as part of Task Force Eight under the command of Rear-Admiral R.A. Theobald, UNS), they had begun the escort of convoys between Kokiak, Dutch Harbour and intermediate points.

"Their tour of duty, which occupied a little over two months, brought no actual contact with Japanese naval forces; but was made memorable by a long series of convoy voyages under excruciatingly foul conditions....

"Meanwhile, in the sunnier waters to the south, Canadian naval strength was becoming more a matter of faith than of fact. In June a Japanese submarine had shelled Estevan Point on Vancouver Island, emphasizing the danger of attacks on coastwise shipping. Nevertheless, before the end of summer the five corvettes which had remained based on Esquimalt after the departure of the Aleutian expedition were sent to the Atlantic. Until the three Prince ships and the two corvettes returned from the north at the end of October, only a force of thirteen Bangor minesweepers could be maintained along the thousands of miles of coastline separating Prince Rupert from Juan de Fuca Strait." (2)

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1. Tucker, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 241.
  2. Schull, op. cit. pp. 122-123.

Naval activity in the Aleutians continued in the summer of 1943. On 15 August an Allied invasion force consisting of American and Canadian troops landed on Kiska. It was found that the enemy had already hurriedly departed. Three Canadian ships helped in the ferrying of Allied troops in this operation: the corvette HMCS DAWSON and the minesweepers HMCS OUTWARDS and HMCS CHIGNECTO.

BRIEF NOTES CONCERNING OPERATIONS HMCS PRINCE ROBERT

- WHILE BASED AT ESQUIMALT -

1940-1943

September 1940:-

HMCS PRINCE ROBERT at Esquimalt completing conversion to auxiliary cruiser (Armed Merchant Cruiser).

Increasing concern over German merchant ships in neutral ports to the south.

WESER, German merchant ship at Manzanillo, Mexico, known to be making preparations for sea.

12 September 1940:-

Prince ROBERT sailed "in a very unready state" to intercept.

Night of 25-26 September 1940:-

PRINCE ROBERT captured WESER who offered no resistance. Flying the white ensign above the swastika, WESER was taken into Esquimalt with a prize crew aboard.

WESER, renamed VANCOUVER ISLAND, made several Atlantic crossings before a German torpedo ended her career in the Allied service.

Autumn 1940:-

PRINCE ROBERT returned to Caribbean patrols.

Summer 1941:-

Operations in South Pacific. Escort of troop convoys bringing Australian and New Zealand airmen to Canada under the Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

October 1941:-

PRINCE ROBERT escorts troop ship AWATEA carrying Canadian troops to Hong Kong.

4 December 1941:-

PRINCE ROBERT cleared Honolulu for home port three days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. (No evidence from PRINCE ROBERT's log to support rumours that she sighted the Japanese battle fleet before it attacked Pearl Harbour.)

Spring 1942:-

PRINCE ROBERT PATROLS west coast in face of Japanese threat.

Summer and Autumn of 1942:- Operations in Aleutians:

PRINCE ROBERT on escort duty with convoys bound Kokiak--Dutch Harbour. At close of these operations PRINCE ROBERT went into refit for conversion to anti-aircraft cruiser, and subsequent service in the Mediterranean.



BRIEF NOTES CONCERNING OPERATIONS HMCS PRINCE DAVID

- WHILE BASED AT ESQUIMALT -

1942-1943

30 December 1941:-

PRINCE DAVID arrived at Esquimalt from Halifax.

January to August 1942:-

West Coast patrols.

Summer and Autumn of 1942:-

Operations with American naval forces in the Aleutians: PRINCE DAVID on escort duty with convoys bound Kodiak--Dutch Harbour.

Winter 1942-1943:-

West Coast patrols.

1 May 1943:-

HMCS PRINCE DAVID de-stored and paid off for conversion to a Landing Ship Infantry (Medium) and subsequent service in the European theatre.

APPENDIX "C"

BRIEF NOTES CONCERNING OPERATIONS HMCS PRINCE HENRY

- WHILE BASED AT ESQUIMALT -

1942-1943

May 1942:-

HMCS PRINCE HENRY arrived at Esquimalt from the Caribbean where she had been operating under the command of Commander-in-Chief, American and West Indies Station.

Summer and Autumn 1942:-

Operated in conjunction with the US Navy in the Aleutians on escort duty with convoys bound to Kokiak and Dutch Harbour.

Winter 1942-1943:-

Patrols off the British Columbia coast.

30 April 1943:-

HMCS PRINCE HENRY de-stored and paid off for conversion to a Landing Ship Infantry (Medium) and subsequent service in the European theatre.

APPENDIX "D"

BRIEF NOTES CONCERNING OPERATIONS HMCS DAWSON

- WHILE BASED AT ESQUIMALT -

1941-1944

6 October 1941:-

HMCS DAWSON commissioned at Victoria, B.C.

Winter and spring 1941-1942

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

August to November 1942:-

DAWSON came under the operational orders of Rear-Admiral R.A. Theobald, USN, as part of Task Force Eight for duty in the Aleutians. DAWSON carried out escort duty with convoys bound Kodiak--Dutch Harbour.

12 September 1942:-

DAWSON, in company with HMCS VANCOUVER, carried out an unsuccessful attack against what was believed to be a submarine contact.

Winter 1942:-

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

February-June 1943:-

Convoy escort duty, in company with VANCOUVER and various American naval units, in the Aleutians.

Summer 1943:-

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

August 1943:-

DAWSON, as a member of the Allied invasion fleet that landed American and Canadian troops on Kiska, helped in the ferrying of Allied troops in this operation to re-occupy the Island.

Fall 1943:-

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

14 February 1944:-

HMCS DAWSON sailed for Halifax.



BRIEF NOTES CONCERNING OPERATIONS HMCS VANCOUVER

- WHILE BASED AT ESQUIMALT -

1942-1944

20 March 1942:-

HMCS VANCOUVER Commissioned at Victoria, B.C.

Spring and early summer 1942:-

Patrol duties on the West Coast.

August to November 1942:-

VANCOUVER came under the operational orders of Rear-Admiral R.A. Theobald, USN, as part of Task Force Eight for duty in the Aleutians. VANCOUVER carried out escort duty with convoys bound Kodiak--Dutch Harbour.

Winter 1942:-

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

Spring 1943:-

Engaged on convoy escort duty in the Aleutians.

Summer and fall 1943:-

Patrol duty on the West Coast.

14 February 1944:-

HMCS VANCOUVER sailed for Halifax.

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Naval Historical Section,  
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