

BC's Fishermans Reserve – When local fishermen defended the country's west coast

by Catherine Gilbert

Of all the unsung heroes of World War II, the members of British Columbia's Fisherman's Reserve Service remain a largely unknown group who served in the Royal Canadian Navy from 1939-1945. The Reserve was formed in 1938, even before the onset of war, as it was evident to the Canadian military that the Royal Canadian Navy had neither the manpower nor the necessary ships to successfully protect the entire west coast of Canada. This special fleet was made up of fishermen and men from the towboat industries, and their first hand knowledge of the coast coupled with their ability to slip into areas inaccessible by larger ships, made them an invaluable asset to the war effort and to the navy.

Captain Donald Peck, who wrote about serving in the Reserve in *Raincoast Chronicles Six/Ten*, commented that the navy intended to use "the available experience and equipment of the commercial fishing fleet". The men were recruited from up and down the west coast by Lieutenant Colin Donald, travelling on *HMCS Skidegate*, and the vessels were largely conscripted seiners and packers. Later, after war was declared with Japan in December 1941, a number of the fishing boats confiscated from the Japanese-Canadian fishing fleet would also be used by the Reserve. The Reserve boats were given the designation HMCS (His or Her Majesty's Canadian Ship) and were numbered to identify them as Reserve boats.

The recruits' enthusiasm was evident when more than 40 boats with full crews attended the first training course that ran in February, 1939 at the naval base in Esquimalt. Adrienne Mason, in her book *Tales from the West Coast: Smugglers, Sea Monsters and Other Stories*, tells us they "received training in navigation, the use of mine sweepers, and other skills they'd need for their patrol". Boats were equipped with a .303 Lewis machinegun (apparently antique), a wireless/telegraph set, depth charges and minesweeping gear. The fishermen were then sent on their way home with uniforms and .303 Lee-Enfield rifles, to continue fishing until they were called up for service.

The uniforms they were issued sometimes caused confusion, according to an article in the May/June 1960 issue of the *Crowsnest Magazine*, and fishermen were often mistaken for chaplains. This misunderstanding, however, was quickly dispelled once you heard "the salty language of the fishermen".

The vessels were also equipped with radios and in the event that they were unable to defend themselves against an enemy submarine, they were expected to contact headquarters, who would then dispatch air defence. In reality, the fishermen's best defence lay in their ability to manoeuvre away from trouble and head for shallow water where a submarine couldn't follow. In Peck's account he confirms that the threat from Japanese submarines was very real and had occasion to hear the sonar 'ping' that confirmed the presence of a sub. In fact the Estevan Point lighthouse, on the west coast of Vancouver Island where Peck patrolled, was fired upon by a Japanese submarine in June, 1942.

Reports of submarine sightings were fairly common. Beverly Dingwall, who grew up on the east coast of Vancouver Island in the port village of Kelsey Bay during the war years, recalls her mother saying that she was certain she had sighted a periscope rise up out of the water and go down again. Today, Mrs. Dingwall comments that they probably looked around and soon realized that there was nothing of interest there.

HMCS Allaverdy and *HMCS Van Isle* were two Reserve boats often seen at the port of Kelsey Bay and at nearby Yorke Island. Not only did they patrol the coast, but they were used by personnel stationed on Yorke Island (where a defence fort was built due to the island's strategic location at the north end of Johnstone Strait) to get supplies and bring fish to vary the soldiers' diet. The skipper of *HMCS Allaverdy*, Melven Skibo, was a frequent visitor to the Edward household on Hardwicke Island, to the east of Kelsey Bay, and his name appears in the autograph book kept by Dorothy (née Edward) Mann who was a child at the time. Her older brother Logan recalls that the *Allaverdy* had an interesting history – it was built by a Captain Roberts, who had made his money running guns to Spanish rebels in the 1930s. According to naval records, the *Allaverdy* was returned to Roberts in April 1945 with a settlement of about \$3000. A cash reimbursement was an idea implemented by Captain Peck, as when some of the fisherman returned to retrieve their gear in Esquimalt after the war, much of it had been already been picked over and taken by those discharged at an earlier date.

For her book *The Gumboot Navy* published in 1988, author Carol Popp interviewed numerous members of the Fisherman's Reserve. The accounts of their adventures are often revealing and entertaining, but unfortunately, Popp conformed with the men's wishes to remain anonymous, and with no official lists, it is difficult today to identify them and to verify who crewed the various boats.

We can only thank them posthumously for being willing to lend their time, skills and equipment to their country in its time of need, and for voluntarily becoming part of the Royal Canadian Navy, if only for the duration of the Second World War.