



A *Starshell* Book Review by Jan Drent

THE ARMING OF CANADIAN MERCHANT SHIPS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

By Max Reid (2003) 154 pp, available from Max Reid, 550 Fairview Ave., Rockcliffe Park, ON K1M 0X5. \$20 including postage, cheques payable to "RCNA-DEMS."

Those who served at the same time as Captain Max Reid will call to mind his unforgettable flow of original ideas. Max Reid first went to sea as a 17 year old RCNVR Seaman Gunner in Canadian merchant ships in 1943. In "The Arming of Canadian Merchant Ships" which he has co-published with the Royal Canadian Naval Association / Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships Branch, he tells the story of how merchant ships were armed and their guns manned. There is little in print on this subject. The postwar navy would have had a collective memory of heavily armed civilian ships and their naval gunners, but over time, awareness has faded.

Max's book is welcome both as an account and because its appendices list the Canadian naval personnel (including twenty-two officers listed separately) known to have served in merchant ships during the war, and as well, gunners from other Commonwealth countries who served in Canadian ships. In addition, there is a list of Canadian soldiers stationed in Scotland who were sent to sea in North Sea trawlers in May and June of 1940 as Anti-Aircraft Lewis Gunners.

When war came in 1939, Canadian merchant ships were armed with guns that had been stored by the Admiralty in Halifax and Esquimalt. Several British vessels, including two auxiliary merchant cruisers, were also armed in Canada using these gun stocks. In the early days, merchantmen also carried portable machine guns, mostly Lewis guns dating from the Great War. During the early war years, providing guns for all Allied armed merchantmen was organized by the Admiralty. Some 340 Canadian sailors were drafted piecemeal as DEMS (Defensively

Equipped Merchant Ships) gunners. Since the Canadian merchant navy was small, many of the 340 served in British or Allied vessels. By 1942 however, Canada, which in 1939 Reid reminds us, had only a small industrial base, had improvised weapons production and was building large merchant ships. Factories across the country were manufacturing everything from weapons and ammunition to torpedo nets. Bata Shoe for example, was producing .50 cal. machine gun mountings. The initial programs for deep-sea freighters were for Britain, but Canada then continued building the same types of vessels for a new merchant fleet. These were Canadian-manned, and an increasing number of naval ratings with gunnery training found themselves in DEMS. By the middle of the war, even the CPR *Princess* steamers on both coasts were armed and carried naval guns. The RCN started speciality DEMS gunnery training in Halifax and Esquimalt in 1943. These schools eventually trained about 1,500 gunners in basic and advanced courses. In addition, speciality DEMS Convoy Signalman courses had started in Canada in late 1940. By war's end, over a hundred had been trained to serve with Convoy Commodores.

Merchant ships were fitted with guns like venerable 12-pounders. Canada produced 1,500 of these obsolescent mountings during the war (weapons of this 1898 concept are still seen in naval gun runs) to deal with surface targets. In addition, Canadian factories manufactured dual anti-surface and anti-aircraft guns like 4-inch mountings (over 1,000 were built, primarily for merchant ships and River-class frigates), anti-aircraft guns including 20mm Oerlikons, plus

anti-aircraft rockets, .50 cal. heavy machine guns, minesweeping paravanes and anti-torpedo nets. A 10,000 ton Canadian *Park* freighter—which had stiffened decks under mountings, gun tubs and plastic armour on the bridge—ideally had a Petty Officer gunlayer, a Leading Seaman and ten seamen gunners. In practice they usually carried about eight. The armament of such a ship is shown on the front cover of the book. All weapons were controlled locally and while such armament sounds heavy, it had limited effectiveness against air attack. However, its deterrent effect forced enemy submarines to expend expensive torpedoes against merchantmen instead of using their deck guns.

Reid estimates that about 2,500—of which 2,442 are listed by name—Canadian naval personnel served in DEMS. As the largest number at sea in a given period was roughly 645, he extrapolates that a relatively high percentage rotated between General Service and DEMS. His book includes vignettes about the DEMS experience of several veterans including his own adventures in four different ships. A total of 303 Canadian merchantmen were eventually armed and supported. The glimpses of typical long wartime voyages are of particular interest because they cast light on the little-known contribution by Canadian merchant ships to the Allied effort at sea. Nowadays we tend to view the Commonwealth navies from our 21st century perspective as distinct entities. Reid, who was there, reminds us that 60 years ago there were virtually no lines of demarcation within Commonwealth DEMS. Canadians served under several flags and Commonwealth gunners were in Canadian ships right up to 1945. While the Canadian DEMS gunner were all naval personnel, of the 38,000 British, 14,000 were army (known as Maritime Royal Artillery) and 24,000 Royal Navy and Royal Marines. The ephemeral Canadian flag merchant navy vanished by the early 1950s, and Reid writes that most of the 2,500 Canadian DEMS simply disappeared into civilian life.

Max Reid published "DEMS at War!" in 1990. There is some overlap between the two books but "The Arming of Canadian Merchant Ships in the Second World War" contains more detail about individuals, more information about training and qualifications, and a more complete overview of weapons