

Submarines, Princes and Hollywood Commandos, or At Sea in B.C.

J. M. S. CARELESS

No one could question the significance of naval history for this ocean-bordered region. But I don't intend to deal with its high strategic import; merely to examine certain lighter aspects of the British Columbian naval story, memorable happenings in two World Wars. This will not be a particularly well-connected narrative of widely separated events, linked up by some central message — unless this be that only in British Columbia were such things likely to take place. Everything grows so profusely and luxuriantly on this mild and humid coast — even the odder undergrowth of history. You could find it harder to conceive of such doings on the bleaker, more staid east coast. At any rate, it is well said that wackiness did not begin with Mr. Bennett in B.C.

I have two main exemplary tales to tell. The first concerns submarines on the west coast during World War I. But it is really just a curtain-raiser, since I can assume that the learned gathering present has already heard of British Columbia's brief career as a naval power in 1914, with the submarines, CC1 and CC2, the only completely submersible navy of the period — intentionally submersible, that is. Still more, you well might know of an excellent article on the submarines' role and activities written by Gilbert Norman Tucker: my old boss at Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa for a period in World War II, and later Professor of History at UBC. This account appeared in the *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* for 1943, but a good story is worth re-telling, and, in any case, the younger historians here may not have worked back into the dim antiquity of the defunct BCHQ.¹ And so I offer a come-on with the First War submarines, before turning to a fuller treatment of some Second War events.

¹ See G. N. Tucker, "Canada's First Submarines: CC1 and CC2. An Episode of the Naval War in the Pacific, 1914-18," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, VII, 3 July 1943, pp. 147-70. Since the account given of the submarines below is drawn from this source, backed by other secondary material, it has not been felt necessary to present a string of *ibids* as citations. All references concerning the submarines come from this BCHQ article; only two quotations taken from it are given specific citation themselves.

Recall the situation on the North Pacific coast at the close of July 1914 (you will know it well), as Anglo-German conflict was about to break out, and the British Admiralty sent its warning telegram to Royal Navy forces around the world. An elderly British cruiser squadron lay far down in South American waters; a more modern German squadron under Admiral von Spee was at large in the western Pacific, with two cruisers, the *Leipzig* and *Nürnberg*, probably off the coast of Mexico. Actually, the former was in a Mexican port, while the latter was ranging off the Hawaiian Islands. But to defend British Columbian waters, in the event of a quite possible raid, there was only the over-age *Rainbow* of the recently founded Royal Canadian Navy — under-manned and under-armed besides — and within possible supporting distance the small Royal Navy sloops, *Algerine* and *Shearwater*. Victoria and Vancouver were virtually open to assault. Almost anything would help. And there were two new-fangled submarines being built for the Chilean navy in Seattle nearby, on which payments were in arrears, since the Chileans thought them overweight and so of insufficient endurance at sea.

The answer arose out of a meeting held on July 29 at Victoria's Union Club (of course). There a little group of city business men, including Captain W. H. Logan of the London Salvage Association, met with the president of the Seattle Construction and Drydock Company, J. V. Patterson, builder of the submarines. They learned that the two vessels just might be available — at a price, that is. Chile was to have paid \$818,000 for the pair; Patterson now would take \$1,150,000 — he knew a good thing, indeed. The next few days saw busy conferences in Victoria, as Sir Richard McBride, provincial premier, got into the act, along with officers from the Esquimalt naval dockyard and Martin Burrell, federal member for Yale-Cariboo and Minister of Agriculture in the Borden government, who chanced to be on holiday in Victoria at the time. Anxious efforts were made to have Ottawa authorize the purchase of the boats, but the discussion turned on their usefulness in the current naval situation, so that the Commander-in-Chief Esquimalt wired Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa, who cabled the Admiralty — twice — without immediate reply. Presumably their Lordships were too busy getting steam up in the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow to give speedy attention to far-off British Columbian waters. At any rate, recognizing that delay until after a British declaration of war could mean that a neutral United States would refuse to release the vessels, McBride resolved to act on his own. He agreed to buy them with provincial funds: the key step to British Columbia acquiring its very own navy.

On August 4 a somewhat cloak-and-dagger mission from Victoria met with Patterson in Seattle to close the deal. It consisted of Logan and Sub-Lieutenant T. A. Brown, RCNVR, the latter disguised as a cook, and evidently intended to smell out any German agents among the construction company's submarine staff. Patterson insisted the price was non-negotiable, but he would deliver the subs to Canadian waters. That night, as the British Empire went to war, the submarines crept out of Seattle harbour on their quiet electric motors (for undersea use), not starting up their noisy diesel engines until safely at sea. By morning light they had reached their rendezvous point, five miles south of Trial Island. Here the Canadian ship *Salvor* met them with Lieutenant-Commander Bertram Jones aboard. A retired Royal Navy officer with several years of experience in submarines, he carried with him a cheque for \$1,150,000 drawn by the Province of British Columbia on the Canadian Bank of Commerce. Jones inspected the new craft thoroughly; Patterson, eager to be off, got his money; British flags were hoisted, and the little war fleet proceeded to Esquimalt, arriving there on the morning of August 5.

It almost didn't, for its sudden unexpected appearance caused widespread alarm in Esquimalt that the Germans were on their way. The examination ship on duty outside the harbour dashed madly for safety, with her siren lashed open, bleating continuous alarm. The shore batteries, manned by the Army, had not been told of the arrival and were making ready to fire, but fortunately somebody telephoned the Dockyard first — fortunately, indeed, or the British Columbian navy, with few men trained to dive it (or to get it back up if they did) might have been eliminated on its first morning.

In actuality, it was to have but a brief provincial existence, as the federal government moved in to take it over. The Admiralty had now replied, approving acquisition of the boats; and Borden on August 5, the very day of their arrival, transmitted that news to McBride along with warm appreciation of the latter's action. A nice touch followed when Naval Headquarters signalled Esquimalt the same day, "Prepare to purchase submarines," and Esquimalt answered, "Have purchased submarines."² On August 7 the Government of Canada took on their purchase price, and the vessels became a regular part of the Royal Canadian Navy as HMCS CC1 and CC2, under the Admiralty's overall wartime control.

The submarines' saga was still only at its beginning, however. They yet

² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 154.

lacked crews and armament; they were a purely nominal factor in the naval balance. Another trained submariner was uncovered, Lieutenant Adrian Keyes, R.N. retired, then working in the Toronto offices of the Canadian Northern Railway. He was hastily packed off to the west coast to command one sub while Jones took charge of the other. They directed the training of Victoria volunteers for the crews, with only a few old naval hands among them. And 18-inch torpedoes had to be sent out all the way from HMCS *Niobe* stationed at Halifax, jouncing their way by rail across Canada. One by mistake travelled with a filled compressed air chamber. If it had taken off in the mountains, it could have derailed the train and jammed a trans-continental tunnel — as one of the German navy's cheapest inland victories. But the torpedoes arrived intact, and the crews grew ready from constant drill and practice dives. It was not found out till later that the reason the crucial Kingston valves (which controlled filling and blowing the subs' ballast tanks for diving and surfacing) did not seem to work right was that inadvertently a piece of two-inch plank had been left sloshing around inside one tank and a pair of workman's overalls in the other. Such are the countless hazards of life at sea — or rather beneath it. Still, the tricky, crowded and uncomfortable CC1 and CC2 were brought to do their job efficiently; and it was an important job at that.

They became, in fact, effective units of sea defence, able to guard the restricted approaches to B.C.'s most vital coastal waters, her chief cities and main waterborne traffic. Beyond that, however, was their *presence*, and the knowledge of it. For three years they patrolled out from Esquimalt, until in 1917, with the United States in the war — and Von Spee's fleet long since destroyed by British forces at the Battle of Falkland Isles — they were sent eastward to the Atlantic war zone. Yet perhaps the submarines' greatest role and service was in the opening days of war in 1914. Then their presence mattered highly — for one thing, in stilling public anxieties over the apparent defencelessness of the west coast. When the war broke out, banks in Victoria and Vancouver started sending their funds inland. Citizens bought millions of dollars worth of bombardment insurance — and one Victoria family converted its cemetery vault into a bomb shelter. Moreover, the then Senior Naval Officer at Esquimalt, overworked and overwrought, went rather round the bend, ranging the streets to fight off Germans. The scare might have enlarged to panic had it not been that the press, learning of the submarines' arrival on August 5, thankfully took to spreading the word of the impressive, latest modern instruments of war that had now appeared to save the Far West of

Canada. The *Colonist* and *Times* trumpeted the power and merits of the subs. And the authorities were only too happy to have their existence known, not least to enemy designs.

That raises the second point about their presence. Did it deter an actual attack? The evidence is uncertain and will probably remain so. Nevertheless, it is clear that the German cruiser *Leipzig*, pushing onward to San Francisco, learned by radio on the night of August 6 that British west coast naval forces now had “two submarines bought from Chile.”³ Whether the Germans would otherwise have gone on to Juan de Fuca, we do not know. In any event, they did not (and assuredly they did not know the helpless condition of the subs at that precise moment). In sum, we may say that the essential feature of CC1 and CC2 was that they were available — to redress the naval balance and to restore confidence to the B.C. public at a crucial period. McBride had really made an excellent deal.

In their later life the subs completed a gruelling 7,000-mile voyage to Halifax, repeatedly breaking down en route; and there they spent the rest of the war, too worn out to be sent on across the Atlantic. Yet they were little coastal submarines, after all; primitive pioneers at that, however brave they had looked off Victoria in 1917. Their voyage alone, via Panama, was monumental. British Columbians could well be proud of their three-day navy and grateful for its subsequent years of fortitude and service. Besides, they still have the distinction of being the only Canadian province with a navy — so far. I say “so far” advisedly, since Alberta might well acquire one, as soon as it has bought an ocean. It already has an air force, of course. . . .

But now for something entirely different — to coin a phrase — Princes, Commandos and World War II. Such an acute audience as this has probably already recognized that the Princes are ships (we’ll get to commandos later) — specifically, the Royal Canadian Navy’s armed merchant cruisers, *Prince Robert*, *Prince David* and *Prince Henry*, built originally for the pre-war B.C. steamship service of the Canadian National Railways. For where else but in this royally inclined province are you so likely to find sea-going princes among a profusion of floating empresses and princesses, and where even the ferries are queens? To get back on course, as sailor types say, the Princes, for some time in their day the largest, most powerfully gunned warships in the RCN, had been initially designed for west coast waters in the late 1920s as part of the expansive

³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

and expensive policies of Sir Henry Thornton, then President of the Canadian National. Thornton had hoped to wrest more of the prime coastal passenger traffic from his great CPR rival, and especially to build up Prince Rupert as his line's northern terminus on the Pacific. Hence in 1930 — hardly an auspicious date — three fast new vessels were delivered to the CN west coast service: the Princes *Robert*, *David* and *Henry*, built at Birkenhead in England according to lavish specifications that, at a cost of eight and a half million dollars, made them miniature luxury liners.⁴ They were nearly 6,000 tons each, 385 feet long and capable of over 22 knots, a high speed then for ships of their size. (By comparison, old CC1 and CC2 had been of some 300 tons displacement, about 150 feet long, and could reach 13 knots on the surface.) The *Prince Henry* was intended for the Alaska traffic, the *Robert* to drum up coastal trade utilizing Prince Rupert, and the *David* to ply the triangle route between Vancouver, Victoria and Seattle.

On arrival, they made a grand impression with their three big raked funnels, sleek lines and rich appointments. But the thirties proved bleak years for Alaska tourism, the triangle trade had too much competition, and no one seemed to want to go to Prince Rupert. At any rate, the handsome-looking vessels languished — as did Henry Thornton who resigned his office in 1932 under a general cloud of criticism. It should also be noted that the Princes had been designed under Admiralty requirements for possible conversion to armed merchant cruisers in event of war. Thus they were overpowered for civilian traffic and hence expensive to run, while their fast lines gave them a rapid roll none too endearing to passengers.⁵ Accordingly, unhappy stringencies decreed that while the *Robert* should continue in west coast service, the *David* and *Henry* would be sent to try their luck in the Atlantic, on Maritimes-West Indies runs. Yet times were hard there too, and so by 1936 the *David* was chartered to a New York-based cruise company for trips to Panama and Hawaii. That these cruises again did not do too well is indicated by the fact that she kept a full head of steam up in her ports of call for quick escapes to sea from the company's creditors.⁶ The next year *David* was laid up by CN steamships in Halifax. The year following, 1938, *Henry* was sold off to Clarke Steamship Lines for use in their St. Lawrence-Labrador-New-

⁴ G. R. Stevens, *History of the Canadian National Railways* (New York, 1973), p. 375.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁶ Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 24, vol. 6717, NSS 8000-412/112. Notes by Cdr. W. Strange, 14 September 1946.

foundland operations. She was barely making a go of it, as was *Robert* on the west coast, when the coming of world war in 1939 brought on dramatic changes in the careers of all the Prince ships.

Again there was an urgent naval need for the best available ships, to supplement a diminished Royal Navy and an all but extinguished Royal Canadian Naval force. Again there were vast gaps in naval defences against German power — global gaps, in fact. The Princes had speed, and the size to carry larger-calibre guns than existing Canadian warships. They might be used to escort slow-moving convoys, but smaller vessels could fill that role; and in the earlier years of the war there were additional needs to deal with long-range commerce raiders and seize German merchant craft at loose on the high seas. The Prince ships could relieve destroyers for the Atlantic alleys of the U-boat war, while patrolling farther waters against surface raiders or evasive German shipping. And so, in the fall of 1939, *Robert* and *David* were acquired by the RCN for conversion to warships, the *Henry* following shortly afterwards. The *Robert* was taken up at Burrard Drydock in Vancouver and was ready in July of 1940. The *David*, in poorer condition, took until December 1940 to be completed at Halifax, as did the *Henry* at Montreal.⁷ All three went through the same essential process. Their two top decks were cut off and replaced with the superstructures of light cruisers, their three funnels being reduced to two squat ones. Hulls were strengthened and sub-divided, and they were each fitted with a main armament of four substantial six-inch guns, with secondary guns, torpedo tubes and depth charges besides.⁸ When finished they looked fierce enough to take on a pocket battleship: all three at once, at least.

And yet there were problems. Their main armaments had been supplied out of Admiralty stores saved from scrapped warships of the last war. It was rumoured, wrongly, that their guns dated from the Boer War. In truth, the six-inch had come from old King Edward VII class battleships, their three-inch secondaries out of 1916 vintage cruisers.⁹ These were thoroughly sound weapons, but lacking in range and modern fire control. Moreover, the Princes' quick, jerky roll limited their fire power's accuracy and concentration in any kind of sea. Still further, the *Robert's* working-up trials brought lessons for all three. When she fired her main

⁷ G. N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (Toronto, 1952), 2 vols., II, p. 520. See this volume for information on the Princes' naval acquisition, conversion and subsequent refits.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

guns forward the heavy recoil threatened her own charthouse, and patterns of broadsides went wide as the ship rolled merrily. Some “damping-down” measures were taken to lessen the trouble, but the message was plain. Don’t fire too many guns too often.¹⁰ The Princes were not as formidable as they looked.

Yet once more, they were available, and within their limits would do much. In her first year of naval duty in the Pacific, *Robert* captured the sizeable German merchant liner, the *Weser*, escorted contingents of Australian and New Zealand airmen to Canada for training there under the Commonwealth Air Training Plan, took Canadian forces to Hong Kong — and departed from Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, on the way back to Esquimalt just before the Japanese paid their surprise visit. *Henry* intercepted two German ships off Callao in the spring of 1941 (they scuttled themselves), then patrolled both in the Pacific and the Caribbean into 1942. And *David* worked between Halifax and the West Indies through 1941, sometimes in company with *Henry* in Caribbean waters. Their powerful-looking silhouettes, seen at a distance, may well have inspired free-flowing rumours that Dutch 8-inch heavy cruisers were ranging about the area.¹¹ At any rate, German commerce raiders with guns better than the Prince ships’, but not 8-inches, seemed notably to vanish from the Caribbean. Be that as it may, the success you gain without a battle is surely one of the most pleasant kinds.

But the *David*’s own gleaming moment, also a pleasant one without a struggle, was to occur in the summer of 1942, by which time she too had returned to the Pacific and British Columbia after a voyage via Panama that brought her to Esquimalt late in December 1941.¹² The fact was, of course, that the entry of Japan into the war and the destruction of the American fleet at Pearl Harbor had made the Pacific a vastly more serious zone of conflict; and once again, as in 1914, the British Columbia coasts seemed all too unprotected from attack. (They could even have used the old CC1 and CC2.) So the *David* joined the *Robert* on patrols out of Esquimalt, where the *Henry* arrived also in midsummer. All three ships were to serve in the Aleutian Islands campaign against Japanese invaders that autumn. In a real sense they had come back to their home waters. The *Robert* was from the start heavily manned by British Columbians.

¹⁰ PAC, RG 24, vol. 11838, COPC 8000-314/3. J. O. Cosette to COPC and COAC, 6 November 1940.

¹¹ Personal conclusion of the author derived from signal files while serving at Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa, 1943.

¹² PAC, RG 24, vol. 7549, Ship’s Log, *Prince David*, December 1941.

The *Henry* and *David* increasingly gained Victorians and Vancouverites in their crews also. And the *David's* special episode of glamour came off Vancouver Island in July 1942 — when the Hollywood commandos entered also.

Down in Hollywood, California, Columbia Pictures was planning a movie, eventually to be called "The Commandos Strike at Dawn." In the first half of 1942, a grim period when most of Europe was in German hands and the western allies were reeling in defeats from North Africa to the Philippines, one of the few brighter notes to be found lay in the exploits of British commando units raiding the coasts of Fortress Europe. Their attacks had aggressive dash and daring, and, more than that, promised the techniques for lasting landings and the ultimate invasion of Hitler's empire. From Combined Operations by sea and land would stem the Second Front in Europe: that was the hoped-for path. And so it was both good movie business and effective morale boosting to make a major film of a commando operation against the coast of Norway, playing up the strength and spirit of the underground movement as well as the expertise of the raiders from the sea. And where was the nearest Norway but Vancouver Island, with its deep sea fjords and rugged mountains? It all depended upon the co-operation of Canadian military and naval forces on the west coast.

John Farrow, to be director of the film, had the right connections. As a Lieutenant-Commander RCNVR, he had been on loan to the Royal Navy, wounded in the South Atlantic and invalided out, but had retained his links with Naval Headquarters in Ottawa after returning to film work.¹³ A capable director, he also had a strong concern for publicizing the war effort and keeping up patriotic enthusiasm. It is fair to say that he wanted a stirring spectacle, but for more than box-office purposes. In any event, he got the response he needed from Naval headquarters and National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa. Canadian forces would provide the troops, both British and German, to the film-makers, together with and most vital — the raiding warship itself. *Prince David* was chosen to become a movie star.

The main human stars were Paul Muni, an outstanding actor with a distinguished set of films behind him, to be the heroic Norwegian leader of the underground; the masterly Cedric Hardwicke as the British Rear-Admiral in command of the raiding expedition; Anna Lee, well-known British actress as the heroine and love interest (playing an officer of the

¹³ *Victoria Times*, 21 July 1942.

“Wrens,” the Women’s Royal Naval Service); Lillian Gish, making her movie comeback as a gallant elderly Norwegian patriot; and skilled Alexander Knox as the local Nazi commander, complete with precise, sneering ruthlessness. (Two years later he played President Woodrow Wilson with no less aplomb.) The story was straightforward simplicity. Muni escapes the Nazi clutches to reach Britain with information on a major German air base near his native village. A commando raid is organized, while the hero falls in love with Anna. A Royal Navy cruiser — read *Prince David* — streaks for Norway laden with commandos, plus Muni, Hardwicke and others, surprises the shore defences at dawn, and lands the troops, who free the village and destroy the base with tremendous battle and explosion. Then the raiders and the *David* sail for home triumphant, along with some surviving villagers, having thoroughly pasted Knox and the forces of tyranny in the process.

The filming on location commenced in mid-July 1942 with Victoria as its base, the actual site of the Norwegian coast being on nearby Saanich Inlet. Plainly this site was very convenient: close to the facilities and flesh pots of Victoria, on the sunny and not exposed side of the island, yet featuring superbly suitable coastal scenery, if one avoided arbutus trees and over-massive Douglas firs. A Norwegian fishing village took shape on Finlayson Arm, while interior sets were built within the main exhibition building at the Willows.¹⁴ Troops in training at Camp Nanaimo were drafted for the action and temporarily encamped in Goldstream Park.¹⁵ And the call went out for a mass of extras from Victoria to be Norwegians, while the Hollywood actors, the film-makers and support staff descended in their numbers on the city. The Empress Hotel throbbled with the expedition from Columbia Pictures, as if six boatloads of Seattle tourists had arrived at the front desk all at once. Victoria was not unacquainted with such visitors from Hollywood — indeed, in the prewar years it had been the setting for a number of “quickie” American movies, which thereby could enter the United Kingdom film market under the quota for British-made products. But there had scarcely been so many celebrated stars on hand together or a production on such a scale before.

Daily the cast assembled at its Empress headquarters to be bussed out to the film site. On one occasion Alexander Knox, late for the bus, stamped briskly through the lobby in Nazi officer’s uniform and Iron Cross, followed by jack-booted soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* — and nearly

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; see articles on the movie-making variously, 21 July - 11 August 1942.

¹⁵ PAC, RG 24, vol. 15230, War Diary of the Royal Rifles of Canada, 1-31 July 1942, Appendix V.

caused heart attacks among the old ladies of the Empress in the shrubbery.¹⁶ No one had told them that the Germans had got *this* far. Then, at the site, the shooting went on (literally), as men from the Royal Rifles of Canada, the Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury Regiment and the Canadian Scottish, playing commandos, beat down the German defences and captured the dazed, demoralized garrison (the 114th Veteran's Guard). They totally overwhelmed the enemy air base, adjacent to Patricia Bay airport, with sand-filled mortar bombs, thunder flashes and smoke generators, while blank ammunition filled the air. The troops were "dynamic," reported the War Diary of the Royal Rifles: "They gave all they had to the performance, much to the delight of the producers."¹⁷

These doings took some days; but the *Prince David's* own role began on July 24, when the filming of the ship sequences got under way. At Esquimalt, a heavy sound truck was hoisted aboard and lashed to the portside of her upper works, along with a portable electric plant, spots, reflectors, and a tangle of feeder cables along deck, so that she could only present her starboard side to the camera.¹⁸ Admiral Hardwicke arrived to take command. His resplendent gold braid earned him a flurry of salutes on his progress through the Dockyard, which as a veteran First War officer he solemnly returned. It seemed, he said, "the polite thing to do."¹⁹ Some ninety "commandos" were then marched aboard, as the cameras ground; other troops were already waiting at the site. Then *Prince David* sailed off for Saanich Inlet, looking rather like a holiday-cruise vessel once again. Gazing down from her bridge her commanding officer, Acting Captain V. S. Godfrey, RCN, must have gulped a little to see his trim ship festooned about with cables and cinema equipment, his crew off-watch consorting on deck in the sunshine with sports-shirted cameramen and sprawled-out soldiers, all smoking Columbia's free cigarettes — while the "Admiral" was genially having his picture taken at railside arm-in-arm with various seamen. One shouted, "Take two of this for me: I'll never be as close to a Rear-Admiral again."²⁰ Nevertheless, the Captain evidently got into the swing of things later, turning out to be

¹⁶ *Times*, 29 July 1942.

¹⁷ War Diary, RGC, *loc. cit.* It might be noted that the relevant War Diaries of the Canadian Scottish and Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury Regiments were not available, but the RRC record is full and broadly useful.

¹⁸ Evidence from photograph in author's possession. See also Ship's Log, *Prince David*, *loc. cit.*, July 1942.

¹⁹ *Times*, 25 July 1942.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

“a natural dramatic actor” in his filmed exchanges with a now highly professional Admiral Hardwicke, as the ship steered into action.²¹

The *David* was filmed steaming majestically up Saanich Inlet, guns bristling, steel-helmeted troops peering from her deck, then out again (for the return journey), always showing only her good side. Back into the Inlet, her main armament crashed out in Mill Bay as she engaged the surprised German shore batteries, registering hits and soon silencing the enemy fire — that fire and the *David's* hits being electrically exploded dynamite charges.²² Then the assault boats were smartly swung out; the troops slid rapidly down into them, and the craft went boiling away, crammed with Canadian soldiers under Columbia's command. The landing operation was completely successful, except for rope burns suffered by those who had slid down into the boats with too much zeal.²³ Otherwise, a good time was had by all. The picture-makers were overjoyed. And the Royal Rifles War Diary recorded happily, “The Commando spirit invaded even the nautical minds of the Navy, as many tars expressed their envy and admiration of this branch of the Army.”²⁴

Nonetheless, given the ways of the movie world, various shots and scenes had to be retaken or embellished, and so it took a few days more before all the landing operations in the spirited assault on Vancouver Island were dealt with satisfactorily. And after a hard few hours of racing up the rocky foreshore or sweating into the woods, with demolition equipment, there were welcome stops for “ice cold beers” supplied courtesy of Columbia Pictures.²⁵ Here was another nice kind of battle, where nobody shot back with more than blanks; picnic lunches were ready for everyone, furnished by the Empress; the beer was kept chilled; and the only casualty, a Canadian Scottish machine gunner who jammed his hand in his gun's mechanism, got first aid from United Air Lines hostesses who had come along to play WAAFs, the women's unit of the Royal Air Force.²⁶ *Prince David's* own part ended when she returned to Esquimalt from anchorage in Patricia Bay late on July 27, and disembarked the soldiery and camera crews. “All Columbia gear landed,” the ship's log reported laconically — and thankfully, perhaps.²⁷

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² War Diary, RRC, *loc. cit.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Times*, 28 July 1942.

²⁷ Ship's Log, 27 July 1942.

Work on the film continued into August, with more battle retakes and interior scenes. The irony was that before it had concluded, the real thing happened on a horrific scale: the landing operations at Dieppe on August 19, with heavy losses among the 5,000 Canadian combatants, who were scarcely more experienced than those who had gone ashore on Saanich Inlet. The extent of the losses was hidden at first. Thus Columbia decided to finish the picture speedily and release it while the Dieppe Raid still gripped public attention with speculations on the coming invasion of Europe and the Second Front.²⁸ And so "Commandos Strike at Dawn" came out during 1942, not in 1943 as initially planned. But meanwhile *Prince David* and her sister ships had gone into the Aleutian campaign. And afterwards they were taken in hand at Vancouver for extensive refitting, to adapt them to new uses in the changing war at sea.

Prince Robert became a powerfully armed anti-aircraft ship, equipped with guns of smaller calibre than her old 6-inch, but with more guns and efficient fire control. In this wise, she was to serve with distinction on the Bay of Biscay in 1943-44, while escorting Gibraltar convoys. The *Prince David* and *Prince Henry* were transformed into heavy landing ships, infantry, with less armament but sizeable space for troops, assault craft and radio command gear. They were to lead their groups in putting ashore Canadians in the invasion of Normandy on D-Day in 1944. Here there was a brighter kind of irony (if such a thing be possible). Among the forces they placed on Juno Beach that day were men of the Canadian Scottish — the same unit that had swept to shore from *David* in the very different Hollywood summer outing on Vancouver Island of two years before.

David and *Henry* went on to share in the invasion of southern France, notably carrying commandos, if French and American this time. Then the *David* took British commandos to raids and landings in Greece, almost re-enacting the role she had established in rehearsal back in '42. She must have been good at the act, for in October 1944 she was chosen to transport the Greek government and prime minister to Piraeus for the re-occupation of Athens: a somewhat more meaningful event than pseudo-Admiral Hardwicke's raid on pseudo-Norway.

Thereafter, the *David* sailed all the way back to Esquimalt, where the *Robert* had joined her by March 1945, to be readied for the Canadian Pacific squadron intended for the final naval operations against Japan. Two of the Princes had come home again. The *Henry* never did. She

²⁸ *Times*, 22 August 1942.

went instead to Malta, then to Britain to complete her career as a Royal Naval headquarters ship. The *David* had also finished active service; the Pacific war was over before she was renewed to enter it. As for the *Robert*, as usual, she was ready first. In fact, at war's end she was at Hong Kong, and there landed the first party to enter the prison camp containing survivors of the Canadian troops which she had escorted there, so long before, in 1941.²⁹ War has all sorts of ironies, indeed.

At the close, the Prince ships had journeyed far and seen much since first they had appeared off the shore of pre-war British Columbia. Like the CC1 and CC2 before them, they had markedly contributed to west coast naval tradition — though never more divertingly than *Prince David* in the epic film raid on Vancouver Island. Provincial submarines, Gulf of Georgia light cruisers and Goldstream Park commandos: all had done their part in suitably adorning the uncommon history of the wonderful world of B.C.

²⁹ Joseph Schull, *The Far Distant Ships* (Ottawa, 1950), p. 386. See this work for the general operations record of the Prince ships in World War II.