

Atlantic, especially on the main convoy lanes. The battle began to shift to the middle and western Atlantic.

Convoys to or from North America were securing protection at both ends of the voyage but—except for troop convoys which warranted continuous capital ship protection—there was a long gap between the point at which escorts from one side left off and the other took over, and tragic losses in this area began to occur.

Convoy escort ships were exceedingly scarce. What was wanted was many fast, manoeuvrable ships which could be produced quickly and cheaply by Canadian as well as British ship-yards. Just before the war Britain had been experimenting with a new type of small ship, the corvette, for local defence. The new warship was not beautiful; it was not well adapted to high seas operations because of its limited range and the discomfort it imposed on crews; its main weapons were depth charges, not guns. It had not been tried in battle, but there was nothing else suitable in sight.³⁹

Contracts were let early in 1940 with nearly every ship-yard in Canada, including those on the Great Lakes; and already, as the submarine menace worsened, the first of the new ships began to come down the ways in British yards. There can be little doubt that the corvette saved the situation. It was to be improved as the war continued and to be succeeded in part by larger and more sophisticated escort ships, such as the frigate, but by that time the turn of the war had come and the corvette had proven itself as a seaworthy and efficient fighting ship capable of great endurance so long as refuelling facilities were available at sea.

The St. John's Naval Base

There was also great need for a mid-Atlantic base where the little ships could refuel and rest crews between convoys, and from which protection could effectively be given to convoys over the long gap in mid-Atlantic. St. John's was the only port available. Hitherto it had not played much part in the war, largely because it was unsuitable for the larger ships of the navy. But it was far from ideal; the harbour was small and already crowded; it opened directly on an area of the Atlantic notorious for fog and storms; it had no substantial industrial base to support a ship repair industry; supplies for construction and maintenance would have to be brought in from the mainland or Britain; and it had a limited supply of skilled labour and of housing facilities and office accommodation for service personnel. But it had the inestimable advantage of location on the great circle route about a third of the way between New York and Britain, and close to or alongside the main sea lanes which would permit air cover for convoys far out into the Atlantic.

The plan proposed by the Admiralty was briefly that the convoy route should be divided for escort purposes into three areas: the Western region where east-bound convoys would assemble under local escort,—Halifax for

³⁹ Tucker, G. N. T. *op. cit.* p. 31-33 and 37-42.