
SCENE

18

CG CUTTER *MOHAWK*—1941-1943 (GREENLAND PATROL / CONVOY DUTY)

The assignment to Anti-Submarine Warfare School was a nice relief from the long deployments I had been having. And with the United States now in the war, it felt good to be an active participant in an armed force defending our country.

The training I received qualified me to conn an attack on a submerged U-boat using underwater **sonar** equipment to track the sub and position my ship to drop depth charges that would intercept it at the depth set for the underwater explosion. *No easy task!*

The sonar in the control of a skilled operator sends out a narrow directional beam like a lighthouse. The submarine hull reflects the sound as an echo. The operator can determine the size and depth of the target and its direction and speed. The Conning Officer has to visualize the relative movements of his ship and that of the submarine to judge when to order charges dropped (over the stern) or when to fire K-Guns (that project depth charges off the ship's port and starboard beams).

At school, we practiced on mock-ups and on a real submarine using pop-gun explosives. One day, my student class got to make a dive. Afterwards, when I was on my way back to the barracks, a smart newspaper kid said, "You take a dive today, mister?" I said, "Yes. How did you know?" He said, "I could smell the diesel oil on your clothes!"

When I arrived back in Boston, my immediate problem was to find my new home.

Coast Guard cutter *Mohawk*. She was one of six small icebreakers designed to clear winter ice in harbors around the Great Lakes and the East Coast. They were beautiful,



CGC *Mohawk*

stout little ships, only 165 feet in length, but were part of the Coast Guard's "Great White Fleet" with white hulls and buff-colored stacks, davits, and trim. All smaller ships and boats were painted gray. The famous Coast Guard "racing stripe" was not conceived for another forty years. The hull of these icebreakers was steel with a re-enforced bow cut away at the waterline to enable the ship to ride up on the ice to crush it for clearing channels. The thirty-six-foot

beam made a wide path for most following ships. These cutters had one screw delivering fifteen hundred horsepower and a draft of fourteen feet to protect the single screw.

The living quarters were very nice until we became crowded with wartime complements. The Captain's cabin adjoined the wardroom aft and had a ready-room off the bridge. Officers' staterooms surrounded the wardroom. I was assigned the second stateroom aft on the starboard side. It was very comfortable but no view.

I knew my ship would be in the Boston Navy Yard, so I went directly to the Officer-of-the-Day to locate the dock. It was hard to find. Everything was a mess with all the wartime conversions taking place. Finally, I spotted a little dark gray vessel that looked like a tugboat nested among huge destroyers. When I read "78" on the bow I knew it was **My New Home!**

It seemed logical to send these little icebreakers to join the Greenland Patrol. Four of the six were sent, but there wasn't any winter ice to clear. And these little ships were no match for Storis ice. Maybe the planning staff knew that all along because we were soon organized into convoy escort duty. The whole complexion of Greenland had changed from a sightseeing voyage to a war zone patrol.

That wasn't all that changed. Our innocent little ship was converted into a fierce fighting man-o-war!! She mounted two three-inch fifty-caliber deck cannon, two twenty-millimeter machine guns, two depth charge racks, four K-Guns, and two mouse-traps. Sonar and LORAN. Most staterooms were doubled up. The officers and crew complements were increased about fifty percent. It is not surprising that the crew referred to the *Mohawk* as MIGHTY MO!

The convoy escort ships were in two groups. Two of our little ships joined larger 250-foot cutters. The major North Atlantic convoys sailed to Europe with our biggest and newest cutters and Navy destroyer escorts, with fast ships in the convoys, but we could only make twelve knots, and so we were assigned to escort the dregs, who could not keep up with the sixteen-knot speed of the big convoys. Our routine route was not to Europe but between Sydney, Nova Scotia, and southwest Greenland, crossing the **Davis Strait**. By using the **Strait of Belle Isle**, we saved mileage and time by cutting off Newfoundland and avoiding Cape Race with its usual thick fog. But using the straits was like running a gauntlet of U-boats.



CGC *Mohawk*, in Arctic blue and white camouflage

Of course, everything needed to support all operations in Greenland had to get there by ship: building materials, power plants, instruments, fuel, food, trucks, manpower, everything.

The ships forming northbound convoys assembled outside Halifax or Sydney. Southbound, they assembled at anchor in a large, well protected cove called Kungnat Bay near the head of the Tenugliarfik Fjord that led to Bluie One, the principal airport and shore base for the construction projects.

The Baffin Island chain of stations was a whole separate program ongoing at the same time. A number of New England fishing trawlers were pressed into service. Crews were needed. Officers and men were drawn from Greenland Patrol vessels for their Greenland experiences. From *Mighty Mo*, we transferred two Ensigns and a Chief Quartermaster.

As it so happened, Ensign Oakley, one of those selected, had brought aboard a springer spaniel named **Rickey** to be the ship's mascot. But since the trawler would be too small, I volunteered to see that the dog was well cared for. And he was. We slept together from then until he came to an untimely death. (We anchored each other in our shared bunk with Rickey curled up in the hook of my knees. Let the ship roll! We were firmly secured!)



As an Ensign in "Cold Weather Service Dress"

One of the convoy problems was how to keep the ships together in the fog or snow showers. They lacked radar in those days and it was scary knowing there were other ships close by. One of our crew had a solution to keep the ship following us at a safe distance—he made a wooden raft about four-foot square. Down through the center he put a shaft with a scoop at the bottom which had a larger opening than the shaft. When towed at the end of a very long line at convoy speed a "rooster tail" of water was shot up into the air. The following vessel could see the spray and maintain position on it.

We had one terrifying experience when we rounded Cape Race and headed west in deep fog and found ourselves threading our way between lines of a big convoy headed east!

When hit by fog or heavy snow while in the Davis Strait, the masters of the merchant ships were likely to say "to hell with this" and break away from the convoy to go it alone. When the weather cleared, we might

collect them again or maybe next see them at the end of the run.

We received radio reports of U-boat positions from the Navy Radio Direction Finder Net that kept us especially alert on our sonar. We had lots of contacts, probably large fish and whales, but one time the echoes fit the pattern of a submarine perfectly. It was **General Quarters (GQ)** as we set up an attack pattern. On our final approach, we were traveling directly up a bright moonbeam when crossing at right angles to our course appeared the unmistakable silhouette of a Navy destroyer!!

We had one real encounter when we, with our sister ship, the **Coast Guard cutter Algonquin** (WPG-75), were escorting four ships through the Strait of Belle Isle on a clear, moonless night.

Personnel in our fire room heard a hissing and whining sound pass under the ship, undoubtedly the sound of a torpedo. A few seconds later, the Navy tanker *Laramie* was struck on the starboard bow. We, together with the *Algonquin* and the *Laramie*, fired star shells in hope of silhouetting the U-boat. No luck. She sank the U.S. Army transport *Chatham* and the freighter *Arlyn* and escaped.

We picked up survivors from the *Arlyn* and put them ashore in Labrador, then we escorted the *Laramie* back to Sydney.

While we were at the southern end of the Greenland convoy run, our sister ship, the **Coast Guard cutter *Escanaba*** (WPG-77), was torpedoed and sunk as she approached Greenland. There were only three survivors. I lost a classmate in that sinking.

As we approached Sydney, we received a coded message from Ensign Oakley's trawler that he was being followed by a submarine with its snorkel showing. That was the only message. We reported it immediately in Sydney seeking follow up information. They had not received the message. We thought that strange. Checking into it showed the encryption took place on a day after the code had changed. We had not updated ours so we got the word and the HQ did not. We learned later that the sub left her alone, probably thinking she was a fishing boat.

One of the real dangers cruising in subfreezing weather is spray forming ice on the superstructure. It simply must be removed or the ship may be in danger of getting top-heavy and capsizing. The trawler *Natsek* was probably lost from icing up because the *Nanok* in the same area worked long hours for three days to prevent a dangerous accumulation of ice on the superstructure.



The load of ice must go!

Here are a couple of anecdotes I would like to relate before moving into calmer waters.

Our course put us in the trough of a stormy sea. It was nearly midnight and pitch black outside and red lights only inside. The *Mohawk* was in a deep roll when suddenly there was what sounded like an explosion. We all thought we had taken a torpedo. The ship went dead in the water. The main circuit breaker had kicked out and all was silent. A huge swell had come aboard hopping on top of the Captain's gig, driving the chocks up through the bottom! All we could do was leave the gig's problem until morning, collect our scattered wits and sail on.

It was on a different convoy run, but it sounds like a repeat performance. A young Ensign Butt was Officer-of-the-Deck. He found the sound-powered-telephone to the depth-charge rackman to be unreliable. As a backup, should he need to drop a depth charge, he would use the salvo buzzer. One long buzz would be the signal to drop one depth charge. A second buzz would call for a second drop, etc.

In the constant rolling, something on the flying bridge went adrift and rolled back and forth. Mr. Butt sent the messenger up to find the source and silence it. The messenger

found the buzzer plunger adrift, but didn't know what it was. He dutifully coiled it but unknowingly depressed the plunger. The rackman announced, "ONE AWAY." Before the charge had reached its preset depth, he heard another buzz and announced, "NUMBER TWO AWAY!" Those charges nearly blew us out of the water. Again the ship went dead. Everyone headed for GQ. I had to fight Rickey to be first out of that bunk. Keep him in the bed. Put on exposure suit. Grab red flashlight. Lash on side-arm. Dash to the bridge. Up the starboard ladder, where two Ensigns were trying to get out the waterproof door. One would lock the door and the other would unlock it. Finally, one got his sheepskin-lined mitten hopelessly jammed in the door lock. I went up the port side.

We all stood around at our GQ stations in black silence while the engineers worked with flashlights to close the circuit breaker and get us back to normal. But that was an eerie feeling imagining U-boats lurking all around us!

Inspection next day showed no harm done. If ships are female, as sailors seem to think, then the *Mohawk* was a tough old gal!



Viking church circa 1000 AD

The next day, on the crew's bulletin board, appeared a cartoon of a grave with a tombstone that read: "Mr. Butt...1920-1942...Died of Embarrassment...World War II" and an

EPITAPH TO MR. BUTT

Here lies the body of Baseball Butt, an Ensign of renown.
 He gained his fame by dropping cans, when no subs were around.
 And now he rests beneath this slab, far from the *Mohawk's* terrors.
 His depth charge score was only fair, No hits. No runs. TWO errors!
 Amen

While waiting for ships to arrive to form a convoy, we would go to the naval base in Argentia, Newfoundland. It was a full-service facility with an all-weather airfield. A destroyer tender was moored there to provide water, fuel, food, movies, and assistance with repairs, medical care, etc. There was an Officers' Club with a good dining room and bar, and separate facilities for the enlisted personnel. On our first visit to Argentia, our ship was completely painted with a white-and-blue Arctic camouflage.

I got a glimpse of how naval aviators live (in contrast to us poor “black shoe” sailors). This experience added to an earlier one I got on approaching the Strait of Belle Isle one stormy day. We were rolling our guts out when two PBY Catalina patrol planes from Argentia circled us to make sure we were safe from U-boats and then went back to their steady bunks in a warm BOQ, and the fresh lobster dinners in the club.

But a sad thing happened as we tied to the dock following our harrowing time at sea. I had the conn as we moored to the guest dock. I ordered the gangway put over and Rickey immediately went ashore and started down the dock. I had the bull horn mike in my hand and ordered, “*RICKEY, RETURN TO THE SHIP!*” And by golly, he put on the brakes and started back. A crewman ran out and grabbed him.

The sad part is that he subsequently went AWOL again in Argentia and was hit and killed by a Navy truck. My bunk never felt the same!

An ALCOAST message arrived stating the next flight training class was being formed and members of my Class of 1939 were among those invited to apply.

That sounded good to me, knowing nothing about flying. I submitted a request for assignment. The Captain forwarded my request “DISAPPROVED,” stating I could not be spared. That may have been flattering (and true, as I was a better sailor than that Captain—and we both knew it), but it killed my application. The good luck was that a new Captain was assigned to the *Mohawk* just at that time. I submitted a new application and he forwarded it “APPROVED”! WHEW!

Following another run to Greenland, we had orders to go home to Boston and yard availability. For reasons I have forgotten, we stopped at St. John’s, Newfoundland, for the night. Our new Captain said, “Let’s have a party!” He went on to say that after that passage we deserved one. He would carve roast beef at the table. We would toast each other’s country with wine (the Coast Guard cutters had beer and wine messes), but we needed some ladies to cheer things up. “Mr. Sinclair, you are a bachelor. Go to the hospital and round up about a half-dozen nurses.” I did, and they were delighted to get a meal of roast beef and enjoy the friendship of Americans who were sharing “their” war.

And it was my ***Farewell to Mighty Mo.***

Afterlife. The *Mohawk* returned to Wilmington, Delaware, where she served as the Flagship of the Delaware Harbor Pilots Association and for several years as a floating museum, run by dedicated volunteers. When the city withdrew its support, the *Mohawk* was sold to a Mr. John Azari for testing electrical equipment. He kept her afloat, but the cost was too great. When the Miami-Dade Historical Maritime Museum heard she was available, they became determined to purchase and restore her to her original wartime condition. They placed her in a permanent home as a floating museum at Memorial Park in Key West. (Plans as of 2004.)

Now to a *career change* from a seagoing officer to an aviator!! (if I don’t fail Flight Training).



Greenlander women in Easter finery