

HMCS *Thiepval*

The Accidental Tourist ...

Destination

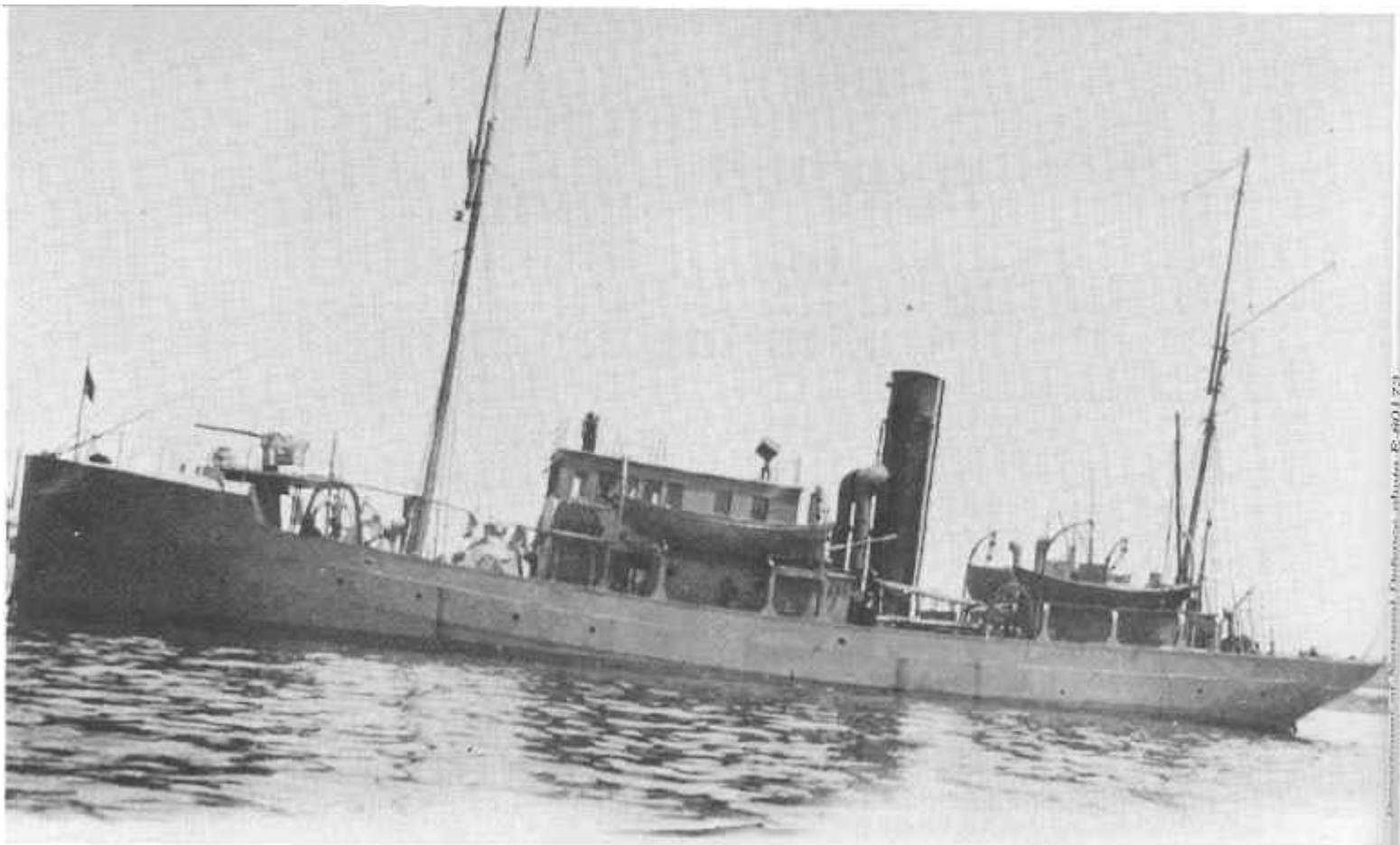
Duncan McDowall

In the spring of 1910 an act of Parliament gave birth to the Canadian navy. What followed were four years of bitter partisan battles over whether this new service would be small and largely coastal, or whether the money was better spent in direct support of the imperial fleet. By the time war came in 1914 the fledgling service consisted of two dilapidated old cruisers - *Niobe* and *Rainbow* - acquired solely for training. During the war this navy evolved into a hodge-podge of little auxiliary vessels as it scrambled to meet the new threat from submarines. By the time the war ended, as the official naval historian Gilbert Tucker noted, Canada had nothing more than "a small ship navy." HMCS *Thiepval* - all 357 tons of her - was borne into this emerging small ship navy in 1917. The little trawler subsequently had a brief but remarkable career in the service of Canada, and a fate that has left her as one of the West Coast's most famous tourist sites.

HMCS *Thiepval* was a 44-metre-long "Battle"-class armed trawler built in Kingston, Ontario in 1917 and commissioned into the navy in the last months of the conflict. Capable of only ten, coal-powered knots, *Thiepval* (named for a Great War battle in which Canadians had fought) was lightly armed with a single 12-pounder gun. Later, minesweeping equipment was added. During her brief wartime career, she guarded convoys and vainly hunted U-boats off Newfoundland. With the peace, she reverted to more traditional Canadian naval duties. In 1919, Ottawa ordered her transferred to Esquimalt where she arrived in the spring of 1920 after a long transit via the Panama canal. She would never leave Pacific waters again.

Together with a handful of sister trawlers, *Thiepval* slipped into the rhythm of West Coast maritime life. Despite the advent of steam power, wireless and improved navigational aids, the Pacific coast in the 1920s was still a daunting environment for seafarers. Vicious storms could roll in off the Pacific. Uncharted rocks abounded. The *Thiepval* would twice graze the rocky bottom, once in 1920 near Prince Rupert and again in 1921 in Gunboat Passage near Bella Bella. Both times, she escaped with a scraped hull and small leaks. In 1925, she was obliged to go to the rescue of her sister trawler, HMCS *Armentieres*, when she temporarily foundered on a rock in Pipestem Inlet in Barkley Sound. Not surprisingly, whenever, a naval vessel put out to sea, her sailing orders concluded with a stiff injunction from the Senior Naval Officer, Esquimalt: "You are to take all seaman-like precautions for the safety of H.M.C. Ship under your command."

In these conditions, West Coast mariners made their livelihood fishing, sealing and moving cargoes. The west coast of Vancouver Island demanded special vigilance. Here was the so-called "graveyard of the Pacific." Merciless cliffs, shrouded in fog and mist and backed by a tangle of forest, provided a grim welcome to mariners who strayed off course onto its shores. In 1874, soon after British Columbia joined confederation, the federal government erected a lighthouse at Cape Beale at the mouth of Barkley Sound. Then, a telegraph line was strung between the lighthouse and Victoria so that news of any shipwreck might be transmitted expeditiously. After the steamer *Valencia* foundered on the rocks at Pachena Point in 1906



HMCS Thiepval, circa 1919, a late war minesweeper destined for west coast patrol duty.

with the loss of 126 lives, a trail (the genesis of today's popular West Coast Trail) was hacked out of the forest to facilitate the movement of rescuers and shipwreck survivors up and down the coast. New lighthouses were built at Carrnanah and Pechena Points. And then the navy arrived.

After the war, the navy began "Life Saving Patrols" every winter along the west coast of Vancouver Island. Vessels like the *Thiepval* took three week stints patrolling the seas, breaking their patrols with lay-overs in Bamfield, where the sailors could go ashore for meals and soccer games at the cable station. The ships manned their wireless sets on a 24-hour basis so that any distress call might be quickly answered. In 1926, for instance, the *Thiepval* pulled the stricken Mexican schooner *Chapultepec* off the rocks at Carrnanah Point. On other occasions, navy trawlers undertook the "Northern Patrol" off Prince Rupert. North or south, the weather was usually dismal and the sea unpredictable. Coal and supplies often ran low. And lurking in the background there was always the fear that Ottawa would cut the navy's puny budget.

Beyond life-guarding, the *Thiepval* fulfilled other duties. She served as a fisheries inspection ship, often seizing American fishing boats "in the name of the King" that had slipped inside Canada's three-mile limit. She counted seals under the terms of the pelagic treaty Ottawa had signed with Washington. In 1922, a bureaucrat suggested that the ship use its 12-pounder gun to bombard the sea lion rookeries, on the premise that the sea lions were "very destructive of salmon." The navy demurred. *Thiepval* also intercepted American rum-runners. In 1921, she caught the American "gas boat" *Sylph* loading booze from a Canadian supplier off Dundas Island just south of the Alaska border. When the *Sylph* took flight, a shot from the three-pounder across her bow brought her to heel. Hours later the *Thiepval* towed the Yankee felons into Prince Rupert and delivered 33 cases and 44 sacks of liquor to Canadian Customs. Through all this, the little trawler kept up her military drills. Gunnery practice, minesweeping and torpedo retrieval for visiting British warships were fitted in between the seals and soccer games. And then, in 1924, there was a break in the little ship's routine.



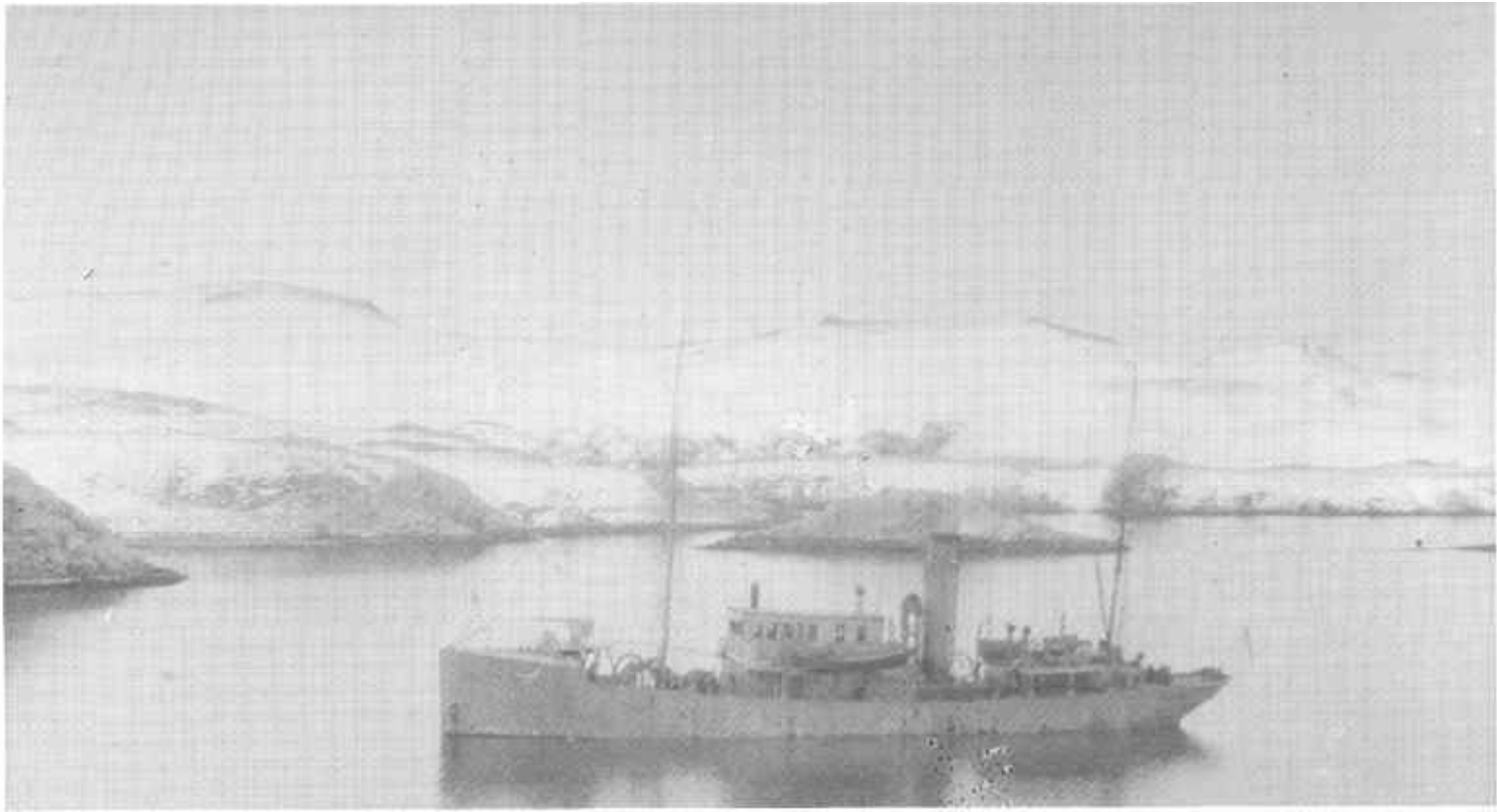
Right: *HMCS Thiepval at anchor, possibly at Bamfield, while on west coast patrol during the 1920s.*

Below: *HMCS Thiepval coaling at Prince Rupert, early 1920s.*

The 'twenties had witnessed the birth of long-range aviation and intrepid flyers. Egged on by national pride and prizes, these pioneers sought to push their aircraft over unprecedented distances. Today, we best remember Lindbergh's 1927 heroics while forgetting legions of other aviators who headed off, some wisely but most foolishly, into the wild blue yonder. In this category was the ill-starred "British Round the World Flight" of 1924. In a fit of fading imperial ambition, Squadron-Leader A. Stuart McLaren left Southampton in March, 1924 in his Vickers Viking flying boat intent on hopscotching his way around the globe. Accompanied by his trusty pilot, Flying Officer Plenderleith, McLaren slowly put Athens, Baghdad, Karachi, Rangoon, Shanghai and Tokyo behind him. Wherever he landed, a British colonial official or consul awaited him with a prearranged stash of fuel. And when he arrived in Petropavlovsk on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula on 24 July 1924, Canada's *Thiepval* was there waiting with fuel and spare parts.

Earlier in the year the commercial sponsor of McLaren's global-straddling tour, Shell Oil, had offered the Canadian government \$8,000 if it would undertake to drop fuel along the flying boat's route as it crossed the frigid gap between Siberia and North America. Naval headquarters in Ottawa quickly concluded that the *Thiepval* was an "entirely suitable vessel" for the mission and on 1 March, just as McLaren departed England, the little ship sailed from Vancouver





HMCS Thiepval in Nazan Bay at Atka Island in the Aleutians. Atka was the Thiepval's jumping off point for the dangerous voyage across the North Pacific to Kamchatka.

with 3,100 gallons of aviation fuel stored in jerry cans on her decks. Below decks, extra coal, water and supplies were crammed into every nook and cranny. Sensing the rigours ahead, the navy put additional crew aboard the ship, including a motion picture cameraman and the Dominion Ornithologist, who would play the role of a Canadian Darwin as the ship sailed through the Bering Sea. Back in Ottawa, elaborate diplomatic arrangements were made to allow the ship to enter Russian and Japanese waters. It was, after all, an armed warship and Russia was a revolutionary state, which just five years before had been invaded by Canadian and other Allied troops in a futile attempt to stymie the Bolshevik Revolution.

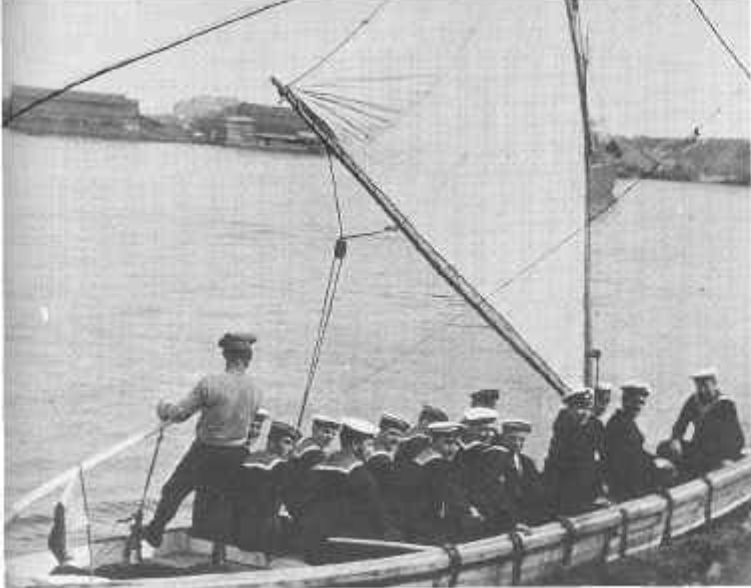
Through fog, snow squalls and North Pacific swells, the ship crept along the Alaska coast until

it reached Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands. From there it pushed across the Bering Sea and made landfall at Copper Island in the Russian Far East. The *Thiepval* thus became the first Canadian warship ever to visit Russia. Although Canada had extended defacto diplomatic recognition to the communist republic, the ship's arrival was greeted with local suspicion and incomprehension. When the Soviet governor of Kamchatka came aboard, the Canadian officers offered him champagne in their wardroom. Even that, a Canadian sailor later recalled, "could not make them speak English, French, German, Spanish or Hindustani." Finally, a "one-eyed, halfbreed native" who had a smattering of English was brought aboard and diplomatic niceties were exchanged. None the less, the Soviets left guards on board and allowed the *Thiepval* to sail on to Petropavlovsk.

The desolate coast of Kamchatka, USSR as seen from the deck of HMCS Thiepval, 1924. Thiepval was the first Canadian warship to visit revolutionary Russia.

DND O-563

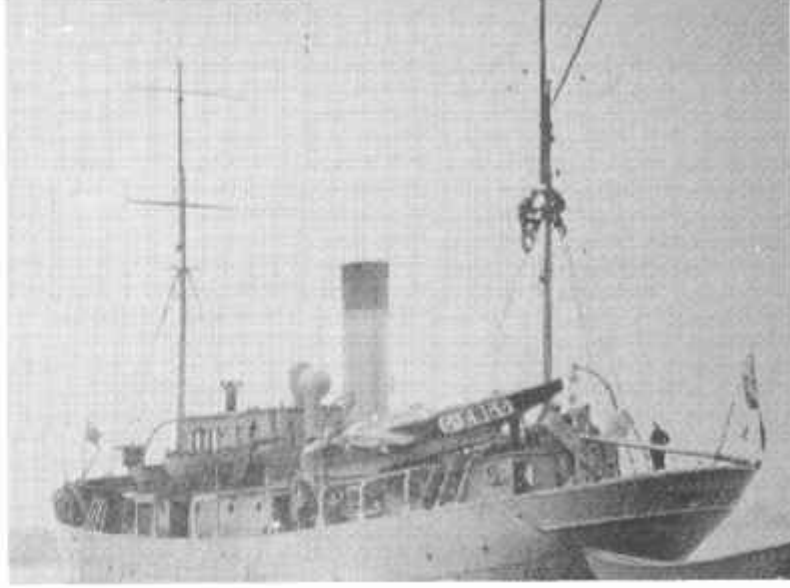




Above left: The crew of HMCS Thiepval heads for shore leave in Hakodate, Japan, 1924. Thiepval was the first Canadian warship to visit Japan,

Above right: The fuselage of McLaren's aircraft sits on the rear deck of HMCS Thiepval following the disappointing end to McLaren's global dream.

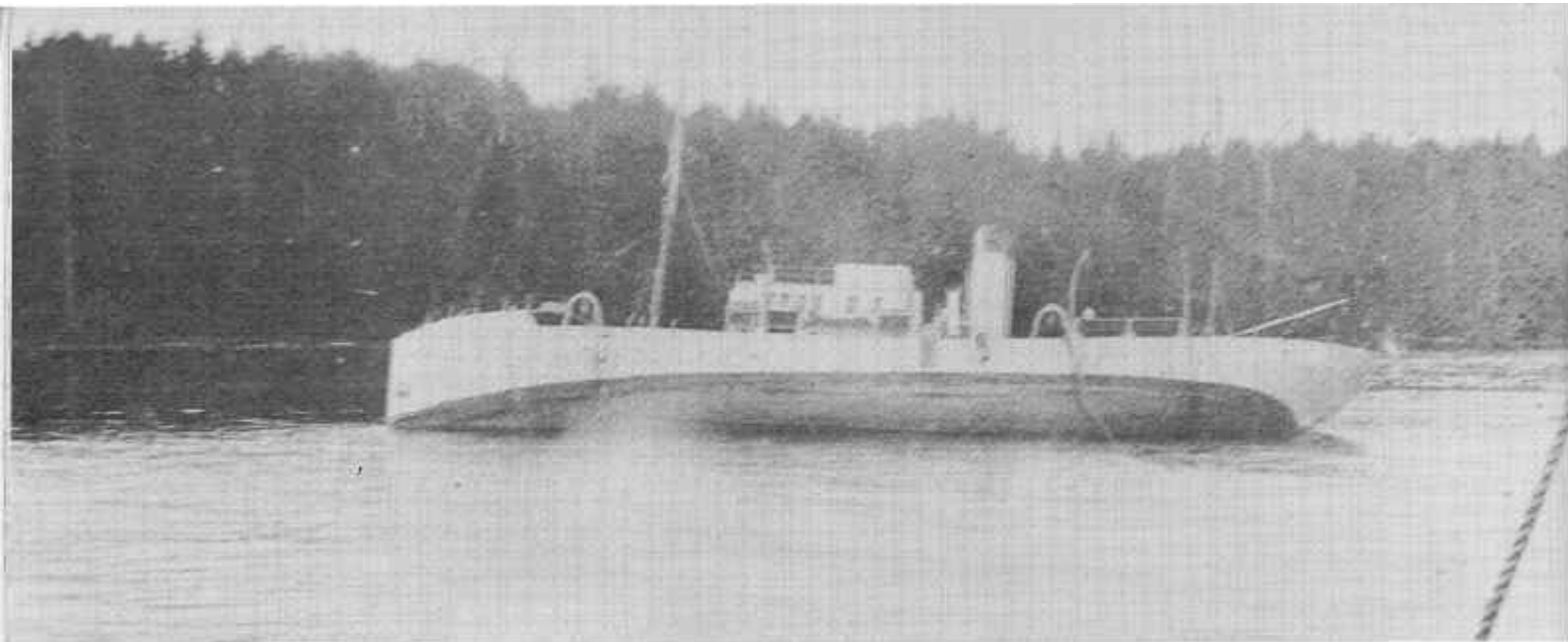
Right: The wooden propeller from McLaren's Vickers Viking seaplane hanging proudly in the officers' mess at Esquimalt, BC.



Little in Soviet Russia impressed the Canadians. "All this 'red tape' in 'free' Russia," one crewman griped. "A quick and speedy cure for anyone with Red tendencies would be a visit to his Red brothers in Russia," he concluded. From Petropavlovsk the *Thiepval* sailed on to Hakodate on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. Here the welcome was warmer; local officials hosted a dinner for their guests and took them to a hot spring. Once again, the *Thiepval* set a precedent as the first Canadian warship to visit Japan. In Hakodate the ship replenished her desperately low supplies of coal, water and food and waited for news of the intrepid British aviators. Finally, in mid-July the *Thiepval* headed back to Petropavlovsk, where on the 24th McLaren's seaplane swooped down out of the skies onto the harbour beside the Canadian ship. *Thiepval's* captain, Lieutenant-Commander Roy Beech, presented the British aviators with a Union Jack embroidered by Lady Byng, wife of Canada's governor-general. Preparations for the jump across to Alaska took on an added anxiety when it was learned that a group of American army pilots were launching their own assault on the North Pacific from Seattle.

Fog and cold rain stalled McLaren until the morning of 4 August. Leaving its Canadian

guardians behind, the plane then pushed out over the ocean towards Bering Island, mid-way to Alaska. But the fog moved in again, reducing visibility to 100 meters. Fearing that he would plough into a fog-shrouded cliff, Plenderleith, the pilot, made a desperate landing in the swells at 1055 hours. The swells, however, caught the plane's wing-tips and ripped them off. Plenderleith then drove the crippled seaplane ashore in the bitterly cold surf. McLaren's global dream had come to grief in what few would dispute was the middle of nowhere. *Thiepval* steamed through the night to reach the crash site. The next morning it hauled aboard the wreckage, used its wireless to send the sad news to *The Times* in London and headed home. On 20 August, a large dockside crowd in Vancouver greeted the ship and her dispirited passengers. *Thiepval* then sailed back to her base in



▲ DND E-80170

▼ DND E-80170



Above: Third time unlucky. HMCS Thiepval hard aground between Turret and Turtle Islands in Barkley Sound. On two earlier occasions the ship had escaped the clutches of west coast rocks; in 1930 she was not so lucky.

Left: HMCS Thiepval stranded, listing and abandoned in Barkley Sound, February 1930. Hours later she would topple and disappear beneath the waves.

Esquimalt, where the Senior Naval Officer saluted Captain Beech with a hearty British, "Well played, Sir!" In the five months since she set out on her mission, 34,400 kilometres had passed beneath *ThiepvaVs* keel. To this day, the wooden propeller from McLaren's seaplane hangs proudly in the officers' mess at Esquimalt.

In the late twenties, the *Thiepval* went back to her familiar unheroic routine of watching fisherman and chasing rum-runners. In January, 1930 she was ordered out on a Life Saving Patrol off Bamfield under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Harold Tingley. Near the end of the tour on 27 February. Tingley headed for Bamfield through the Broken Group Islands. He had used the route before - a broad channel between

Turret and Turtle Islands - and confidently pushed the *Thiepval* up to nine knots. The weather was clear and the sea calm. The tide was rising near full. Then at 1355 hours the ship (as the *Vancouver Sun* would rather sensationally report) felt a "sudden shivering crash, which threw all aboard to the decks." For the third time in her career, the *Thiepval* had hit an uncharted rock. Tingley ordered the engines stopped, the hatches battened and the crew to collision stations. At first, there seemed little damage - the main steam pipe in the engine room broke and the anchor chain disappeared over the bow. Tingley tried applying full power astern but the ship would not budge. A boat was lowered and a quick sail-around survey revealed that the forward section of the ship was sitting on a rock plateau. Hopes that high tide would see the ship float free proved false. At least, Tingley consoled himself, his vessel was not taking on water. And then the tide began to ebb.

As the tide receded, the *ThiepvaVs* purchase on the rock ledge became precarious. Tingley ordered his stokers to shovel coal from one side of the ship to the other. A cable was pulled across to Turtle Island and fastened there in a bid to

stabilize the ship. But just before five o'clock the trawler lurched to the starboard and took on a 45 degree list. An hour later Tingley ordered the ship abandoned and he and his crew of 21 rowed to Turtle Island where they camped for the night.

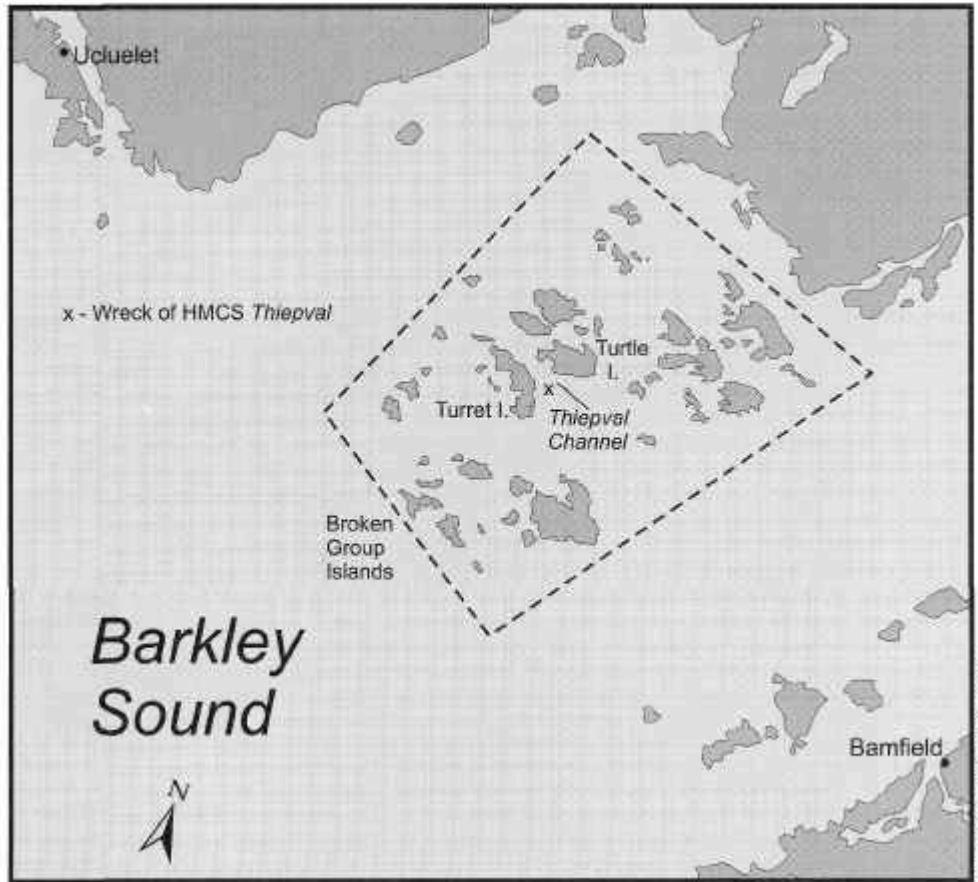
In the morning, the *Thiepval* was still there but continued to list. At the crack of dawn, her sister ship *HMCS Armentieres* had arrived from Victoria, followed a few hours later by the Senior Naval Officer, who flew from Esquimalt by seaplane to look first-hand at the wreck. Bolstered by these reinforcements, Tingley returned to his ship. To his horror he found water

in the engine room and creeping through the mess deck. The morning papers in Vancouver and Victoria had reported that the Navy was confident that the *Thiepval* could be floated off the rock "unaided," but Tingley now realized that this was a false hope. He ordered the crew to salvage what they could off the ship - the wireless, a typewriter, pistols and rifles. But when water began to lap over the starboard gunwale, he again ordered them ashore. There was nothing left but to await the inevitable. Night mercifully covered the final agony of *HMCS Thiepval*. At 2225 hours, she slipped off the rock ledge, turned turtle and sank into seven fathoms of water.


Thiepval's sinking was the Canadian Navy's first, and, God willing, last, peacetime loss of a ship. Abortive attempts were made to salvage the ship, but salvage experts reported that the cost would be prohibitive and so in 1932 the navy decided that the wreck "be abandoned in all respects." As one naval bureaucrat candidly noted, the loss of a ship in the cost-cutting Depression was in some ways a blessing. Back in Esquimalt, Harold Tingley faced a court of inquiry into the loss of his command. Tingley was a seasoned officer, having joined Laurier's fledgling navy way back in 1911. He claimed that

the rock that impaled the *Thiepval* was uncharted. And indeed it was. The only workable chart of Barkley Sound in 1930 had been made by Captain George Richards, RN of *HMS Hecate* in 1861 and the rock was not on it. Tingley was exonerated. In turn, Tingley praised his crew - their conduct in the crisis was "excellent." They had "worthily upheld all traditions of the Service." Tingley remained in the navy, retired in 1935 and during the Second World War returned to serve his country again as harbour master in Esquimalt. In the late 1930s, the Canadian Hydrographic Service recharted Barkley Sound, naming the channel between Turtle and Turret Islands "Thiepval Channel."

The wreck of the *Thiepval* then slipped from public memory for decades. Only the postwar growth of recreational scuba diving gave her a new role on the West Coast. The advent of reliable and affordable scuba gear put wreck diving



Maps drawn by Mike Bechthold © 2000



H.M.C.S. *Thiepval*

*Underwater archaeological perspective drawing of the wreck of HMCS Thiepval.
Drawing by Carol Pillar, courtesy Underwater Archaeological Services, Parks Canada.*

within reach of trained amateurs, who in the 1950s began to join the once-elite world of underwater archaeology. In the summer of 1959, divers from Port Alberni searched the Broken Group Islands and located the *Thiepval*. The next summer they scavenged the wreck. Their booty included light bulbs that still functioned after three decades at the bottom of the sea. Two years later, Ucluelet divers wrenched the *Thiepval's* 12-pounder gun off its mounting and winched it to the surface. It is now on display in Ucluelet.

Since the 1960s, the navy's little lost trawler has become a fixture of Pacific Rim diving. In 1971 the site became part of the Broken Group Islands Unit of Pacific Rim National Park. Gone are the days of free-booting diving. Federal law now prohibits the removal of anything from a wreck. Just as campers and kayakers in the Broken Group Islands must leave a minimal environmental footprint on the picturesque islands, so too must divers leave the *Thiepval*

as they find her. John and Sheryl Mass operate Broken Island Adventures out of Bamfield. The *Thiepval* is a favourite destination for the recreational divers they host in Barkley Sound. "It's a really good dive," John notes, "shallow, safe, relatively intact and well-coated with marine life." Nearby are other wrecks, such as the freighter *Vanlene* which foundered with its load of Japanese cars on Austin Island in 1972.

Recreational diving thus became a growth sector of British Columbia tourism. As numbers increased, however, problems materialized. Not all wrecks in British Columbia waters were easily accessible; some lay in deeper, colder, more treacherous waters than those in Thiepval Channel. Sport divers also did not always approach wrecks with the same sensibilities as divers who treated wrecks as an archaeological resource, to be visited, explored and left untouched as a piece of provincial heritage. In 1975, the Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia (UASBC) was formed to give

voice to this concern and to lobby for the protection of heritage shipwrecks though special provincial designation.

There was, however, no denying the growing attraction of sport diving and its appetite for the exploration of wrecks. In 1990, the members of the UASBC therefore formed a spin-off organization dedicated to satisfying this demand and, in passing, providing some relief from the pressure on existing wrecks. The Artificial Reef Society of British Columbia (ARSBC) was inspired by knowledge that American diving enthusiasts in places such as Florida had taken to deliberately sinking ships to create "artificial reefs" for sport divers. The reefs could be created in locations accessible and safe to divers, not where nature had disposed. Such reefs would also benefit the undersea environment by providing a habitat for fish and marine invertebrates.

In 1989, the British Columbia Parks Department, sensing the stimulus that sport diving might impart to tourism, reported that sport diving was growing at the rate of 20 percent annually. Twenty thousand new divers were being certified every year in BC and that was 75 percent of the Canadian total. Sport diving, the department concluded, was one of Canada's "hot, fast-growing sports." The ARSBC had found an ally. In 1991, the first artificial reef was created off Sydney by the sinking of a 54 metre-long coastal freighter.

British Columbia's artificial reef initiative coincided with changes in the Canadian Navy's fleet. Destroyers, built in the 1950s and 1960s to deter the Soviet Navy, had come to the end of their operational life. As sleek new, high-tech frigates were commissioned into the navy, the old destroyers were "paid-off. At this point most old naval ships were usually sold for scrap - sent to the "bone yard" or "made into razor blades," as the process is often cruelly described. But in the 1990s the world scrap market was glutted and the navy found few prospective buyers for its old ships. Seeing an opening, the ARSBC went to work. Persistent lobbying of the federal and provincial governments followed. The Department of National Defence was consequently persuaded to transfer title to the retired ships for a nominal sum.

Our Only Peacetime Loss?

The *Thiepval* may have been the navy's only peacetime sinking, but the rocky coast of Nova Scotia claimed another of Her Majesty's Canadian Ships. In the chilly dawn of 2 December 1946, HMCS *Middlesex* hurriedly sailed out of Halifax harbour on a rescue mission. As fleet emergency ship, the 990-ton Algerine-class minesweeper had been called to the assistance of the stricken fishing boat *Ohio*. She sailed with her gyro compass out of action. Once clear of the harbour, her captain, Lieutenant Fisher, quickly calculated the ship's true course to the *Ohio* and went below to assist in repairing the gyro. The watch officer was instructed to sail at speed relying on the magnetic compass. Forty minutes later, Fisher felt the ship lurch and then overheard the bridge frantically ordering "full astern." On reaching the bridge, Fisher was told by the watch officer "that he believed the ship had briefly grounded on a sandbar and that he had seen breakers ahead in the murky dawn light. Inexplicably, Fisher ordered *Middlesex's* speed and course resumed. Minutes later, the ship grounded hard on the rocky beach at Half Island Point near Lawrencetown. A force five northeast sea soon made the situation inextricable. The crew fled to shore and over the next weeks supplies and hardware were stripped from the wreck. At dusk on 31 December, *Middlesex's* ensign was struck. The wreck was declared a "total loss" and later sold for scrap by Crown Assets. A board of inquiry laid blame on Fisher for miscalculating the ship's true course by 22 degrees and on the watch officer for failing to ensure that the ship was put on "a safe and proper course." It was a day of sloppy navigation for the RCN.

Finally in December 1992, the first reef was created. The 122 meter-long, 2,900 tonne destroyer HMCS *Chaudière* was sunk off Kunechin Point in Sechart Inlet. Before sinking, the ship was stripped of military hardware, cleaned free of any pollutants and made safe for easy entry by divers. Unlike the 32-hour long agony of the *Thiepval*, the *Chaudière* sank within minutes, the result of the detonation of carefully-placed charges set along her hull. Her last minutes became a spectacle for thousands of onlookers. Other destroyers followed: HMCS *Mackenzie* in 1995 off Sidney, HMCS *Columbia* in 1996 off Courtney and HMCS *Saskatchewan*

in 1997 off Nanaimo. Plans are now under way to sink the former naval supply ship *Cape Scott* somewhere in BC waters. So popular has the artificial reef idea become that another Canadian destroyer, HMCS *Yukon*, was recently sunk to become an artificial reef off San Diego, California.

The once lonely *Thiepval* now has sister ships on the bottom of the Pacific. Each is a small piece of Canadian heritage. The *Thiepval* is a rusting symbol of what were still pioneering days along the BC coast when men pitted their wits and luck against the elements. The Cold War destroyers tell another story of global ideological conflict and high technology. This navy below the waves awaits a new kind of British Columbia tourist, the SCUBA tourist. For those left on land who possess a bit of history or are of a romantic bent, ships like the *Thiepval* can still be imagined chugging their way out of Esquimalt harbour to adventure on the high seas.

A Note on Sources

All material for this article was drawn from the HMCS *Thiepval* files in RG 29 at the National Archives of Canada and at the Directorate of History and Heritage at the Department of National Defence. E.F.B. Watt's article in the *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Volume II, January 1925 chronicles the *Thiepval's* epic voyage across the Pacific. A longer, unedited version of this article is available in the *Thiepval* file at DND. Lt.-Cdr. Harold Tingley's naval personnel file was also consulted at the National Archives of Canada. The author wishes to thank Dr. W.A.B. Douglas, Lt. Richard Mayne (RCN) and John and Sheryl Mass of Broken Island Adventures in Bamfield for their assistance in researching this article.

Duncan McDowall teaches history at Carleton University. His latest book - *Another World: Bermuda and the Rise of Modern Tourism* - was published by Macmillan in 1999.