

“A Letter From Korea” by Lieutenant L.A. ‘Andy’ Collier, RCN

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In this centennial year of the Canadian Navy, it seems appropriate to look back at some of the people and operations that have been undertaken over the past 100 years. What we have here is a letter written by Lieutenant Andy Collier home to Canada from Korea, where he was serving during the Korean War. The original of the letter was donated to the Maritime Command Museum by Ken Bowering a relative of the Collier family.

In December 1950, 27-year old Lieutenant Andy Collier was serving in Korean waters, double-hatted as Staff Officer (Operations) of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) destroyer force attached to the United Nations command, and also as Navigation and Direction Officer of HMCS *Cayuga*, commanded by Captain Jeffry Brock, the Canadian senior officer. Although hectic, the service of the three RCN destroyers had been relatively uneventful since their arrival in the theatre at the end of July 1950 but that changed drastically in November when Chinese forces counter-attacked across the Yalu River and pushed the UN armies back down the Korean peninsula.

Collier’s letter provides an eyewitness account of the dramatic happenings after Brock – with three Canadian, two Australian and one USN destroyer under his command – received direction to cover the evacuation of US forces trapped in the port of Chinnamp’o, which lay 40 miles inland up a shallow, narrow serpentine channel. Brock originally planned to take his destroyers up the river during daylight but a misreading of the situation by the alarmed American commander at Chinnamp’o forced him to make the passage at night. *Cayuga* led with Collier navigating, and he made some 132 fixes over the perilous four-hour passage. The American and an Australian destroyer were forced to turn back after they touched bottom, but the other four made it safely. Upon arrival, as Collier’s letter describes, they found a scene of some confusion but not nearly as calamitous as they had expected.

Collier was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his superb performance at Chinnamp’o. Described as “[a] very fine figure of a man; tall, well built, handsome with a very pleasant face,” Collier went on to a distinguished



Photo: DHH Collection

L.A. (Andy) Collier as a Commander after the Korean War.

career in the Canadian Navy, indeed in 1965 a senior officer described him as “[o]ne of the outstanding officers in the RCN.” He retired in December 1979 having achieved the appointment of Commander, Maritime Command in the rank of Vice-Admiral. Sadly, Collier passed away in 1987 at Victoria, BC, well before his time at the age of 62.

Andy Collier’s letter home is a valuable historical document not just for what it says about Chinnamp’o but also for what it reveals of the attitudes of the young Canadians who fought in the Korean War. Probably thumped out on the Leading Writer’s typewriter and clearly written with an eye to history, Collier wanted to convey the pride that Canadian sailors had in their performance as well as the doubts he had about the final outcome of the war in Korea. We know now that the conflict reached a more successful resolution than Collier probably suspected, and that emphasizes the true value of the letter in that it



Tribal-class destroyers HMCS Cayuga and HMCS Athabaskan in Halifax in 1948 shortly before sailing for the West Coast.

describes the mood of the moment, devoid of any degree of hindsight. That makes it good history. Finally, as Collier confirms, mail delivery to and from the Korean theatre was glacially slow.

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8th. Dec. [1950]

By this time I expect that you will have realized that the war in Korea is anything but over, in fact we have done more in the past three weeks than in most of our previous patrols last summer. It started off when we came up this way on the 19th of last month, and the way things are progressing right now it looks as [if] we will be around for a good long time yet. It appears that maybe the U.N. bit off a bit more than it could chew with the decision to carry on into North Korea with the Chinese commies standing along the border itching for an excuse to start something. When we left on the 19th things were static enough (So it was thought) to put a destroyer in charge and Capt. Brock was made senior officer of the West Coast forces that in itself was a big step and we had the three Canadian destroyers as our unit. From that time on the work got steadily greater and greater for me as in addition to just the straight navigation of the force I am also S.O.O. (Staff Officer Operations) and therefore was assisting the Captain almost continuously with the plans and employment of the ships in the unit. It was during this time that things started to deteriorate ashore and the situation began to take on a more grave aspect. We did not realize just how bad things were but even so we pressed home our patrols as near as safe navigation would permit us into the enemy waters.

Then we heard of the move afoot to remove the Allied forces from Chinnampo, and as quickly as we could, we rounded up the destroyers from their various patrols which now included besides the three Canadian DDs, two Australian destroyers and one Yank destroyer¹ and stood by ready to move in to the assistance of the army in Chinnampo itself first thing in the morning. The situ-

ation looked rather bad and even tho' it has been called 'a removal of forces to more advantageous positions' it was in fact an evacuation where once again the Navy has heeded the call from the army for assistance and, as that is one of our functions as a naval force, we were ready for the call.

The passage into Chinnampo is a very long one, about 45 miles and owing to the mining that had been going on it must be made thru' the swept channels

which in this particular case are only 600 yds wide. That may seem rather wide to you but to pilot a ship and keep within the limits requires a lot of concentration. If you recall the Inchon invasion where they said the tides were 30 feet high, well the same applies to Chinnampo in a slightly lesser degree but that means also that the tidal currents are also very strong and this must be allowed for. Not only was it necessary to keep within the swept channels but this estuary is renowned for its shoals and shallow water. As I said previously it was the intention to go in at first light but at about 10 PM we received another urgent call from the forces ashore for support [so] that we decided to make this passage in the dark of night. At this point I was pretty well twitched and not at all happy with the prospect of leading 6 destroyers up the river but the task was there and as a navigator I was supposedly trained for just this sort of operation and got on with it. It was as dark as the inside of a cow's belly up top and the only thing we had to rely on was the Radar² which thank God really did its stuff. Boats (tugs and minesweepers) were stationed at the corners of the channel to assist and we set off in the dead of night with no moon. For the next 4 hours I was a very busy man fixing the ship continuously all the way in and by the time we dropped the hook off Chinnampo itself I felt very weary. We came mighty close to the shoals in a couple of instances but I am glad



HMCS Cayuga in Korean waters in 1951.

to say the nearest was one that passed 6 feet under our keel. Six feet is OK but mighty close for me. It was about 0330 when we anchored and by the time we were finished with the staff work involved I got turned in shortly after 5. I sure was beat as in the past 4 days before this I was lucky if I managed to get 4 hours a night, the patrols were all fairly close to the land and I was up every hour or so to make sure of our position. I went ashore with the Captain first thing in the morning to see about the evacuation and try and get things moving at top speed so that we could clear out before the actual shooting, if any.

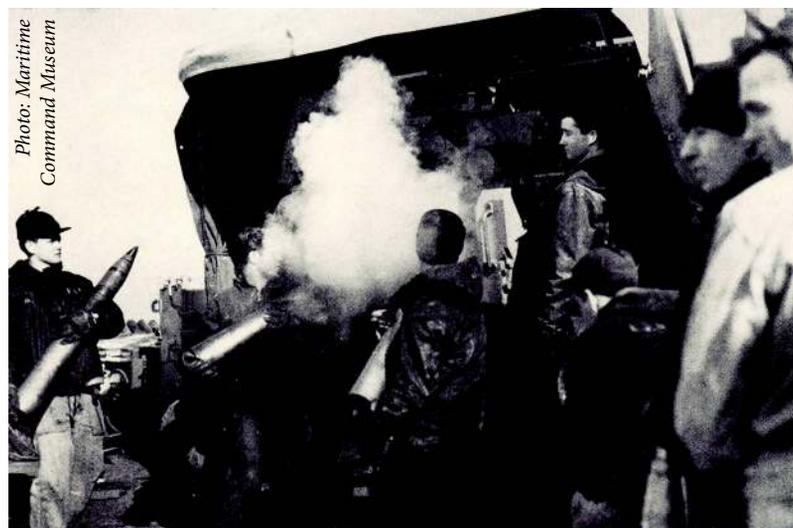
I suppose there is usually a certain amount of confusion and tension at a time like this but things were progressing along OK and with a few pointed hasteners from the Captain we left them to get on with it. The docks were piled high with stores of all descriptions (more of this later when it fell on us to finish off the demolition of said stores).

Loading progressed at top speed all during the day and finally in the afternoon we got some fighters from the British aircraft carrier HMS *Theseus* so I changed my cloak and closed up as a Direction Officer to control them and find out what information I could from what they could see from above. Later in the afternoon the fires started up from ashore where the army were commencing their demolitions and just before dark [we] received word that all the army personnel were off the 'mud.' As the last of the transports and LSTs [Landing Ships, Tank] moved out of harbour we commenced our bombardment of the remaining ammunition and stores dumps. It was a terrible but magnificent sight as each shell landed in the middle of the fires a great explosion would go up several hundred feet in the air. One of [HMAS] *Bataan's* targets was two big oil tanks and when she hit them it was really a sight, towering flames running all over the dockside as the oil ran loose, as it ran over the edge of the dock it was like a 'fire waterfall.' The flaming oil then spread away out over the water still burning fiercely. We had a great sight too when we first hit one of our targets, also an oil tank. It did not blow as *Bataan's* did but merely burnt with great gusto. The tank got red hot and then we put 5 more 2 gun salvos into the tank and each one made a round hole as they went through with the tank left standing with 10 holes where the bullets had gone thru': some shooting with our 4 inch guns eh. Having disposed of all we could that would be of value to the enemy we weighed anchor and moved downstream and I was very thankful when we anchored for the night rather than attempt another night passage of that channel out thru' the shoals.

It is worthy of note to mention that this was almost entirely a Dominion's effort, the only exception being the

Yank destroyer but the Brits missed out on this one, sort of retribution for me only on a much smaller scale for having missed the *Scharnhorst* 'do' in the last war.³ It was commanded by a Canuck to which all goes to show that when the job is set before us there is no hesitation to get on with it and once started there is no giving up until the mission is accomplished. Thus the saying 'the difficult we can do immediately, the impossible will take just a littler longer.'

The big question now, of course, in all our minds is the outcome of this whole Korean war, we certainly have our shoes on backwards at this point and will it mean full scale evacuation or are we going to make a stand – if so where – or will the politicians have a go at squaring it off,



One of HMCS *Cayuga's* gun crews in action during the Korean War.

but the outcome of any plan we may adopt sure does not look any too rosy. At the way in which our mail outgoing has been travelling I suppose most of the above will be answered. We had mail on the 18th Nov. and because of the flap there was not another chance until the 26th but there again owing to employment of ships that mail did not leave the operational zone until today. 🍷

Notes

1. The destroyers were HMC Ships *Cayuga*, *Athabaskan* and *Sioux*, HMAS *Bataan* and *Warramunga* and USS *Forrest Royal*.
2. *Cayuga* was fitted with Type 293 search radar, a fairly useful Second World War British set. However, *Athabaskan*, the destroyer following *Cayuga*, was fitted with a prototype of the Sperry high-definition navigation radar, which was far more effective.
3. In December 1943, Collier was undergoing training as a Midshipman in the battleship HMS *Anson*, which remained at its base in Scapa Flow instead of joining the force that destroyed the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst* in the Battle of North Cape on 26 December 1943.

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