

"The little boat has just put her lights out:" The Life, Fate and Legacy of HMCS *Bras d'Or*

Richard Oliver Mayne

Cet article étudie le court service du dragueur de mine auxiliaire HMCS Bras d'Or, et présente de nouveaux renseignements à propos de sa mystérieuse perte, le 19 octobre 1940. D'abord construit pour des objectifs civils, le Bras d'Or a joué un rôle important, comme d'autres navires auxiliaires semblables à lui, dans la défense maritime du Canada. Pourtant, quand il a coulé, on a commencé à se questionner sur la compétence des réservistes affectés à ces navires et sur la navigabilité de ces derniers. Bien qu'il était sans doute davantage un « petit bateau » qu'un navire de guerre, le Bras d'Or offre néanmoins un regard unique sur le tableau d'ensemble de la compétence de la marine pendant les premières années de la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

While sailing some six miles off Southwest Point, Anticosti Island, at 0350 on 19 October 1940, the second officer of the Romanian merchantman, *Inginer N Vlassopol*, turned to his helmsman and remarked: "the little boat has just put her lights out." But his assumption that the auxiliary minesweeper, HMCS *Bras d'Or*, had simply darkened ship was incorrect. Instead, something had gone terribly wrong as thousands of tons of seawater brought the small ship and her crew of thirty to a mysterious end.

As intriguing as the loss of the *Bras d'Or* is, however, Canadian naval historians, with the notable exception of Fraser McKee, have all but ignored the auxiliary vessels.² In some respects, it is hard to blame scholars for their lack of interest: at first glance tiny ships originally built for civilian purposes do not have the stuff that makes for exciting naval history.³ Yet, there are many aspects of *Bras d'Or's* short RCN career that fascinate. Indeed, unresolved issues about the sinking, along with incidents during her thirteen months' service, not only raise questions about the seaworthiness of auxiliary ships, but also certain attitudes towards the proficiency of the reservists who manned them. Beyond coming to grips with

¹ National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group (RG) 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, Captain Massey Goolden to Captain C.R.H. Taylor, "Summary of statement by Dumitru Pascu," 29 October 1940; Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), BR File, Loss of HMCS *Bras d'Or*, nd.

² Fraser McKee, *The Armed Yachts of Canada* (Erin, Ontario, 1983).

³ Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates* (Toronto, 1990), 81-82.

her fate, this paper will look at how *Bras d'Or* performed under wartime conditions in an attempt to assess whether this particular vessel and her crew were fit for naval duty.

Queries and doubts about *Bras d'Or's* fitness surfaced almost immediately after her loss. Take for example, the account from a prominent Montreal businessmen who, while travelling through the *Bras d'Or's* home base of Rimouski, Quebec, heard townsfolk report that "the vessel was unsafe [and] that she should never have been allowed to sail as she was." Similarly, another man was so concerned about such rumours that he impressed upon the navy how "if the [*Bras d'Or*] was not seaworthy, [it] should at least serve to save any more lives being lost in this manner and a thorough investigation of every vessel in the service should be made."⁴ The only warship in the port, *Bras d'Or* was the subject of much curiosity and as such these testimonials, as well as others like them, could be chalked up to mere "hearsay" from local enthusiasts with overactive imaginations. Naval reports, however, are more difficult to dismiss. Certainly, a memo circulating around Halifax left little doubt that the auxiliary minesweeper was not cut out for the powerful tides, and heavy currents, in the St Lawrence. The "duties assigned to the *Bras d'Or* were often observed to be difficult and slow in execution" this report recorded, continuing with "a stronger vessel would be needed in replacement if such work is to be done efficiently."⁵ Additional reports hardly gave the ship a ringing endorsement, and the fact that public inquiries were still being sent to the Minister of National Defence as late as the 1960s, indicates the enduring quality of the mystery and myths surrounding her.⁶ Nor, unfortunately, was the crew immune to such scrutiny. While most accounts probed the inadequacy of naval training, others were more direct. So much so, that the father of a lost officer complained to the naval service how "the impression is being created [in Rimouski] that seamen on board the 'Bras d'Or' were unqualified and incompetent."⁷ Such interpretations could not be justified, the more so because a profile of *Bras d'Or's* ship's company clearly identifies the wealth of sea experience on board.

To meet the emergency situation at sea, the over-tasked RCN had little choice but to make haphazardly trained crews operational.⁸ Yet, while those serving on *Bras d'Or* may not have had much naval experience, the vast majority had considerable sea time. Aside from three permanent force ratings, all four officers and twelve others were members of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (RCNR), meaning that they were merchant mariners prior to enlistment. Their skills, therefore, were more than adequate to bring the remaining ten crew

⁴ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, NS 8000-441/78, T.F. Mitchell, 23 November 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, NS 8000-441/78, E. G. Palen to Nelles, 03 December 1940.

⁵ DHH, 81/520/1000-5-15, Box 16, File 3, Port of Quebec: Auxiliary Base, NS 1011-1-1, "General Remarks on the River Patrol," 11 November 1940.

⁶ DHH, 8000, Naval Secretary to Military Secretary Office of the Minister of National Defence, "Armed Yachts of the RCN - Second World War," Ministerial Inquiry No. 119, 20 July 1964.

⁷ NAC, Burton Personnel File, O-10864 (Date of Death (DOD) 19 October 1940), William Burton to Naval Secretary, nd [December 1940].

⁸ For more on training in the RCN during the Second World War see: W.R. Glover, "Officer Training and the Quest for Operational Efficiency in the Royal Canadian Navy, 1939-1945" (Unpublished PhD thesis, King's College, University of London, 1998).

members up to speed, who, with little or no knowledge of the sea, were enlisted in the Royal Canadian Naval Voluntary Reserve (RCNVR). That seagoing wisdom was certainly reflected amongst a crew that had a geriatric feel about them. In a fleet where anyone in their late twenties was nicknamed "uncle," the average age for *Bras d'Or's* ratings was 25 'A, while the officers' median age was a whopping 37 years old.⁹

Nevertheless those officers had moulded the ship's company into a close-knit and highly motivated team, one man going as far as to claim "I never saw a happier crowd in all my life... they were in the best of spirits." In particular, there were a number of extracurricular activities that brought this crew together, such as the ship's twelve-man "orchestra" led by Able Seaman E.J. Pelletier, RCNR, of Montreal. There was also the cook, G.T. Ellis, RCNVR, whose skill as a professional fighter gave *Bras d'Or* numerous victories during inter-ship boxing bouts; all of which led one crew member to write home that the entire ship's company was "working hard but enjoying life."¹⁰ A good wardroom and a natural cohesion among the men were important factors that made the *Bras d'Or* a "happy ship," but such esprit de corps was also the product of her easy-going, likeable, and professional commanding officer, Lieutenant C.A. Hornsby, RCNR. His predecessor, Lieutenant A. K. Young, was equally deserving of that credit. He had commanded the ship through the first seven months of her service and was known for his "ability and experience in handling men."

At 6 foot 5 inches, the blonde haired, steely blue-eyed Young towered over his men while barking out orders; ones that, more often than not, were amplified with excessive profanity. That presence, along with numerous naval qualifications from five years pre-war service in the RCNR, made him a good choice to whip seasoned merchant sailors and raw RCNVR recruits into a naval crew. This was not an easy task, the more so because he was starting from scratch. In fact, when Young first saw his warship in late September 1939, a twelve pound gun, minesweeping gear, and the white ensign were all that concealed *Bras d'Or's* former identity as a civilian vessel.

The details of that identity, like those of *Bras d'Or's* disappearance, are marred in controversy. For example, some maintain that it took several years to complete the ship after she was originally launched in 1919 at a Sorel, Quebec shipyard because the owner had gone out of business. Others point to records suggesting that the *Bras d'Or* was built in 1918 at the Poison Iron Works of Toronto, Ontario as naval trawler *TR 18*, which, after years of remaining on the slips, was later rebuilt for the Canadian government." Thanks to the efforts of a private researcher in the late 1970s, naval historians at the Directorate of History in Ottawa came to accept a third theory that a clerical error had led to the misidentification of the *TR 18* as the *Bras d'Or*. Likely representing the solution to the mystery, this view argues that the ship's history began with a French company's order for six commercial trawlers

⁹ DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, Crew List, October 1940.

¹⁰ "Windsor Daily Star," 31 October 1940; "The Evening Telegram," 25 January 1941.

" DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, "A Brief History of HMCS *Bras d'Or*," nd; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, 8000-441/78, HMCS *Bras d'Or*, nd; Ken Macpherson and John Burgess, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces, 1910-1993* (St Catherine's, 1994), 144.

from a Canadian shipyard that went bankrupt during construction. The vessel known as *Hull No. 18*, which was intended to be the *Edouard Houle*, was later finished in Sorel by the Canadian government who then assigned her to the Department of Transport with the utilitarian name, *Lightship No. 25*." The historical record from this juncture onwards is more certain as the 265-ton vessel performed well throughout the 1930s for that department. Of course, wartime conditions offered an altogether different test.

Once requisitioned into the navy, *Bras d'Or*'s first operational tasking was to patrol the approaches to Halifax for submarines. The acquisition of other auxiliaries ensured that the destroyers were not bogged down with such tiring and tedious work, and that reason alone justifies the acceptance of vessels, like the *Bras d'Or*, into the navy.¹³ Yet, during the early hours of 14 November 1939, that argument would have been a hard sell for Commander W.B. Creery, RCN, whose destroyer, HMCS *Fraser*, collided with *Bras d'Or* in the mouth of Halifax Harbour. The Board of Inquiry into that incident gave Creery a slap on the wrist while heaping the bulk of the blame on Young's failure to maintain a proper lookout. Knocking a destroyer out of action was not an auspicious start for *Bras d'Or*, and that would have dogged the ship's reputation had it not been for Captain H.E. Reid, RCN. Reid, who was the commanding officer Atlantic coast (COAC), suspected that the Board was whitewashing Creery's negligence at the expense of a reserve officer and he was willing to say as much to Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) in Ottawa.

Effectively reversing the Board's findings, Reid gave an altogether different interpretation arguing that "...the collision was caused by HMCS *Fraser*, passing through the patrol area at an excessive speed."¹⁴ He was right. Creery had increased speed to twenty-five knots only three minutes before the incident and by doing so had made the collision with *Bras d'Or*, which was twenty five degrees off his starboard bow, inevitable. Nor was Reid happy with the Board's judgement that Young was also responsible because he had originally passed ahead of the *Fraser* from left to right before "altering course 106 [degrees] to Starboard in the course of her normal duties." For the COAC that conclusion made absolutely no sense. Unlike the destroyer, which - having extinguished her navigation lights - was impossible to see, the *Bras d'Or* had been under constant observation from *Fraser*'s bridge for at least four minutes. Worse yet, having spotted a port running light before increasing their speed, the officers on both *Fraser* as well as the *St Laurent* (which was following astern) should have realized that the *Bras d'Or* was heading in a North East direction thereby making the destroyers "the give way vessels." There was more. Failing to take constant bearings of the contact, Creery did not realize that he was in a crossing situation or that *Bras d'Or* was closing steadily. Finally, and perhaps most conclusively,

¹² DHH, 81/520/8000 Box 13, File 3, Mr. R. Webb to P.A.C. Chaplin, 25 April 1979, and Chaplin to Webb, 15 May 1979. The author is indebted to Mr. Webb for sharing some of that research over the past year.

¹³ DHH Library, "Annual Report for the Fiscal Year 1940-41," 10; DHH, BR File, "Loss of HMCS *Bras d'Or*," nd; Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (Ottawa, 1952), 8.

¹⁴ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11106, 55-2-1/4, COAC to NSHQ, "Board of Inquiry-Collision between HMCS 'Fraser' and HMCS 'Bras d'Or,'" 20 November 1939; DHH, 81/520/1057, Vol. I, CO HMCS "Fraser" to Captain (D) Halifax, Report of Proceedings for the month of November, 27 December 1939.

when the threat of collision was imminent Young threw his engine full astern and ordered hard to port, while Creery's actions were more confused: beginning with an insufficient helm order of ten degrees to port, then increased to twenty and finally hard to starboard.

That proved a particularly difficult pill for Reid to swallow because it was painfully obvious to him that it was the regular force officer, rather than the reservist, who had erred. Unlike a Board blinded by the suds of its own whitewash, the COAC could not accept their conclusions particularly since the *St Laurent's* commanding officer, Harry "hard over" De Wolf, had provided a textbook response to avoid involving his ship in the collision. As such, his actions served as an example of what Creery should have done as he "went hard to port and gave two blasts of my siren and switched on navigation lights."¹⁵ In the end, Young's record was expunged of blame. Creery, on the other hand, would again find his helm orders questioned seven months later when the *Fraser* was cut in half after colliding with the British light cruiser, HMS *Calcutta*. Rightly or wrongly, the Admiralty fixed responsibility on Creery for "allowing his Officer of the Watch to turn towards *Calcutta* with only 10 [degrees] of wheel" as well as "increasing to 20 knots, thereby magnifying the error of judgement."¹⁶

Aside from acting as harbinger of that tragedy, *Fraser's* collision with *Bras d'Or* also served as an early manifestation of what a group of reserve officers would later describe as a "discriminatory attitude" that saw permanent force officers "persecuting" members of the RCNR and RCNVR for their lack of naval experience. Eventually reaching the minister's office, these complaints further suggested that the wavy (RCNVR) or inter-twined (RCNR) stripes on a reserve officers' uniform sleeves became a stigma which distinguished them as "amateurs" or "inferiors" when compared to their "straight stripe" counter-parts. Worse yet, this disaffected group of reservists would later argue that the regulars granted themselves an undue number of promotions and medals to advance their careers at the expense of reserve officers who, it was assumed, would return to their civilian professions at the end of the war.¹⁷ While many, including a number of reservists, claimed that such charges against the regulars were exaggerated, the attempt to pin the *Fraser I Bras d'Or* collision on Young certainly suggests that there was at least a grain of truth to these larger allegations. In this particular case, therefore, the Board's self-serving logic was all too clear. A collision at sea would mean little once Young's military service was completed and he went back to the merchant marine. But Creery had made the navy a livelihood, and as such a blot on his

¹⁵ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11106, 55-2-1/4, COAC to NSHQ, "Report of Inquiry Into Circumstances Surrounding Collision Between HMCS 'Fraser' and HMCS 'Bras d'Or,'" 14 November 1939; NAC, RG 24, vol. 7321, HMCS *Fraser* Ship's Log, 14 November 1940; DHH, 81/520/1057, Vol. I, COHMCS *Fraser* to Naval Secretary, Report of Proceedings - HMC Destroyers Halifax Force, 09 December 1939.

¹⁶ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6889, NSS 8870-353/6, Admiral Commanding Second Cruiser Squadron to Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches, "Report of Collision between HMCS CALCUTTA and HMCS FRASER," 28 June 1940; Fraser McKee and Robert Darlington, *The Canadian Naval Chronicle, 1939-1945* (St Catherine's, 1996), 18-19. Realizing that his turn circle was too wide, he then ordered "Port 20," followed by "Hard-a-port" and finally "Hard-a-starboard," which was similar to his actions in the collision with *Bras d'Or*.

¹⁷ Richard Mayne, "Bypassing the Chain of Command: The political origins of the RCN's equipment crisis of 1943," *Canadian Military History*. IX, No.3 (Summer 2000) 7-22.

military record would have larger repercussions for his career. Despite being a regular, however, Reid was obviously unwilling to let Young take the brunt of the blame for an accident that had disabled one of the RCN's most valuable assets.

Unlike *Fraser*, which required extensive repairs, *Bras d'Or* emerged from the collision undamaged and able to carry on with patrol duty. With precious few ships to do that, *Bras d'Or* and her sisters were at the vanguard of Canada's coastal defence. Indeed, the operational records between January and May 1940 clearly bear this out, as the average auxiliary was sent on patrol every other day, while in more extreme cases some went to sea thirty times in a given month. On top of that hectic patrol schedule, however, *Bras d'Or* was also periodically required to sweep the approaches to both Halifax and Sydney harbours for mines. Nor was she the only auxiliary pulling double duties; others were also required to escort Sydney to Halifax convoys because "no destroyers [were] available."¹⁸ Those destroyers were constantly at sea either screening larger British warships or escorting convoys through the 400 mile approach to Halifax,¹⁹ but the fact that the auxiliaries were doing the latter duty in littoral waters indicates that *Bras d'Or* was a much-needed assist. Although exhausted, the ship had done extremely well, so much so that Young was given another vessel with a fresh crew to mold, while the *Bras d'Or* was deemed worthy of a different challenge.

Now under Hornsby, and transferred to the Quebec sub-command, *Bras d'Or* was the solitary naval vessel in the first leg of the St Lawrence gauntlet. Indicating that her busy operational tempo was going to continue, *Bras d'Or* was tasked with patrolling an area between Rimouski and the Saguenay River six days a week.²⁰ And it was soon after assuming those duties that the auxiliary minesweeper was involved with her most celebrated action.

Having set sail from Montreal the night before, the crew of the Italian freighter, *Capo Noli*, were in a precarious situation when their nation went to war with Canada on 10 June 1940. Being so far up the St Lawrence, made their chances of reaching a neutral American port remote. Yet, there was good reason why Canadian naval authorities did not want to wait for warships from Halifax or Sydney to intercept her. Certainly, an unarmed Axis vessel transiting Canada's primary seaway unabated was embarrassing, and she became more of a threat to the navy's pride the closer she got to the open waters of the Gulf of St Lawrence. RCAF surveillance and Government of Canada vessels offered little resistance, meaning that *Bras d'Or* was the only warship that stood in the *Capo Noli's* way. Marking

" RG 24, Vol 7107, File 98-21-25, various entries, HMCS *Bras d'Or* ship's log; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-12, "NOIC Sydney Report of Proceedings for the month of May," 04 June 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-14, Vol. 1 "Weekly Reports for Senior Officers No. 7," 20 May 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-15, Vol. 1, "COAC Monthly Reports," January - May 1940. For example, in the month of May, HMCS *Arras* was ordered on 25 day and 5 night patrols, and HMCS *Fundy* had 13 day and 12 night patrols. DHH, 81/520/1000-5-13, Vol. 3, NOIC Sydney to COAC, "Information concerning port of Sydney," 07 October 1940.

" W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *No Price Too High* (St Catherine's, 2003) 55.

²⁰ NAC, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, NSHQ to COAC, 1654/ 27 May 1940, and NIOC Quebec to HMCS *Bras d'Or*, 28 May 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-15, "NOIC Quebec Monthly Report of Proceedings June 1940," 03 July 1940. Tucker, *77ie Naval Service of Canada*, 149.

the nation's first hostile act towards Italy, *Bras d'Or* was given her instructions: "War has been declared. Capture Italian SS *Capo Noli*."²¹ And with that the pursuit was supposedly on.

The *Capo Nolis* attempted breakout was an instant attention grabber for some jingoistic members of the national media who quickly responded to official press releases about the Italian freighter's "vain attempt to escape the little Canadian minesweeper." According to their accounts, the Axis crew, realizing the futility of running from the pursuing *Bras d'Or*, had been literally scared out of the water when they grounded their ship on Bic Island and then set her oil tanks ablaze.²² What the public did not know, however, was that the freighter's end was actually anti-climatic. There was no chase. *Bras d'Or* was not even in visual contact when the *Capo Nolis* master had ordered his men to scuttle. Moreover, fearing that his ship might become a danger to navigation if sunk in shallow waters, the Italian skipper decided to beach her instead. He then went one step further by surrendering to the Quebec pilot master he had onboard, Mr. J. W. Pouliot. It was only after they were in the lifeboats and were being towed ashore that Pouliot spotted *Bras d'Or* on the horizon, at which point he decided to turn his "prisoners" over to the navy rather than the local RCMP detachment. Simply put, he captured the *Capo Noli* single-handedly.²³

Bras d'Or nonetheless played an important role that day. Testimony from Pouliot makes it clear that the *Capo Noli* was hoping to reach the Gulf, but balked once they discovered there was a "very fast" warship at Rimouski "which would stop us at once." In reality, Pouliot was exaggerating as the *Capo Noli* actually had a four-knot speed advantage over *Bras d'Or*, yet the threat of confrontation was enough to force the freighter's surrender. Moreover, once on the scene, Hornsby dispatched a boarding party to extinguish the fires while he manoeuvred to pick up the *Capo Noli's* twenty-eight-man crew. He then left an officer and three ratings onboard until the prize crew arrived. As fate would have it, that prize crew, which consisted of men from the yet-to-be commissioned armed yachts (along with soldiers from the Black Watch), was led by Young whose new ship, HMCS *Caribou*, was undergoing final alterations. Such familiarity led to a well coordinated effort, earning *Bras d'Or*, as well as these other supporting units, praise from NSHQ for an operation that was conducted in an "efficient and most satisfactory manner."²⁴

Later that month, after a remarkable ten months of non-stop operations, *Bras d'Or* was finally slated for a much needed refit between July and September 1940. She was sorely

²¹ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11491, NRC 21, COAC to *Bras d'Or*, 1525/ 10 June 1940; NACRG 24, Vol. 11491, NRC 21, "Draft Report of Proceeding on the Capture of CAPONOLI," nd. June 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-14, Vol. 1, "Weekly Summary for Senior Officers No. 11" 17 June 1940; DHH, 181.003 (D120), "Italian SS 'CAPONOLI' Aircraft Co-operation," 10 June 1943.

²² DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13 file 13, "Department of National Defence Press Release," 10 June 1940. For examples of newspaper reports see *The Globe and Mail*, *The Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Journal*, *Calgary Herald*, *Vancouver Province*, 11-13 June 1940.

²³ NAC, RG 12, Vol. 1429, 8117-175, "Statement by J.W. Pouliot," 12 June 1940.

²⁴ DHH, 181.002 (D120)EAC 325-35-9/8, "Italian SS CAPONOLI," Copy of signals sent to a/c, 14 June 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11491, NRC 21, NSHQ to NOIC Quebec, 21 June 1940; Roger Jordan, *The World's Merchant Fleets* (London, 1999), 232.

missed during that time. While a number of armed yachts had finally been commissioned, there were still not sufficient to cover the navy's requirements; one was not available to take over *Bras d'Or's* sector. Fortunately, she returned just when the navy needed her most. With Romania falling into the Axis orbit, NSHQ would give the auxiliary minesweeper her second crack at another suspicious freighter trapped in the St Lawrence.²⁵

On 16 October, the British Admiralty asked NSHQ to detain the *Inginer N Vlassopol*, while she was loading pulpwood in Clarke City, Quebec. Lacking the resources to seize her in that port, *Bras d'Or* was told to shadow the Romanian freighter to Sydney at which point the navy would act on the Admiralty's request. At 1633, 18 October, *Bras d'Or* reported the *Vlassopol* was in sight. It was her last signal. Both vessels proceeded down the St Lawrence together, but only the *Vlassopol* arrived in Sydney.²⁶

In an attempt to unravel the mystery, a Board of Inquiry was given the dual task of establishing the cause of *Bras d'Or's* disappearance, as well as determining whether every reasonable effort was made to locate her. On the latter point, there were grounds for criticism. Confused jurisdictions, unclear instructions, faulty assumptions and a series of tragic miscommunications, led to a situation where naval authorities were unaware that *Bras d'Or* had been missing for an entire week.²⁷ Take for example, what happened on 21 October when the naval officer in charge (NOIC) at Quebec, Captain R. L. Jermain, RCN, asked his counterpart in Sydney, Captain M. Goolden, RCN, to instruct the minesweeper to return to Rimouski. His response that *Bras d'Or* had "not reported" was overlooked because Hornsby had neither been instructed to stop in Sydney nor contact the authorities there. Believing he had "satisfied himself that *Vlassopol* had entered the port, it was then assumed *Bras d'Or* immediately headed back for Rimouski.

That an early winter storm, which some described as "the worst in twenty years," had hit the area on the morning of 19 October compounded the error, as it was further assumed *Bras d'Or* had sought safe anchorage somewhere along the way. As such, naval authorities in Quebec and Sydney only grew concerned after attempts to contact her on the 25th were greeted with silence.²⁸ At that juncture, however, it was the director of operations at NSHQ, Commander R.E.S. Bidwell, RCN, who expressed the cold hard truth when he

²⁵ Macpherson and Burgess, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces, 1910-1993*, 144; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*, 02 November 1940. For more information of *Bras d'Or's* refit see DHH, 81/520/1000-5-14, Vol. 1, "Weekly Summary for Senior Officers No. 13," 08 July 1940, "Weekly Summary No. 18," 12 August; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-15, Lieutenant Cumming to NOIC, Quebec, 02 August 1940.

²⁶ NAC, RG24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, Admiralty to NSHQ, 1439/ 160ctober 1940; *Bras d'Or* to NOIC Quebec; NOIC Sydney to NCSO Quebec 1956/21 October 1940.

²⁷ Raymond B. Lech, *All the Drowned Sailors*, (New York, 1982). There are some similarities between *Bras d'Or* and the infamous loss of the USS *Indianapolis* almost five years later. Having delivered atomic bomb components to Tinian Island, the *Indianapolis* was sunk on her way to Leyte by a Japanese submarine. Like *Bras d'Or*, a series of tragic errors lead to a situation where US Navy officials did not realize the ship was lost. As a result, rescue attempts were delayed and out of a crew of 1,199 only 316 were pulled from shark infested waters.

²⁸ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC. 1156-441/78, NCSO Quebec to NSHQ, 27 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, COAC to *Bras d'Or*, 1514 25 October 1940 and "Extract of WT Log Sydney WT Station," 18-27 October 1940.

observed: "it hardly seemed worth while commencing to panic a week late."²⁹ Bidwell was right, of course, but even if the navy had realized at the time that the *Bras d'Or* had gone under, a reconstruction of the sinking makes clear that there was little chance they could have saved any survivors. Indeed, the absence of a distress signal or flare, along with the accounts from the *Vlassopol*, suggests that the *Bras d'Or* went down extremely quickly and did not have time to lower her lifeboat. Given the hypothermia index for that day, anyone left in the water would have succumbed to the elements well before the closest naval vessel, HMCS *Vison* which was some four hours away, arrived. (The water temperature off Anticosti Island on that day was 5 to 7 degrees Celsius, meaning that the survival time for survivors was between one and an absolute maximum of four hours). Moreover, rescue attempts would have been hampered by the vicious winter storm that hit the area some two hours after the sinking. That storm, in combination with a sunrise time of 0641, would have rendered the chance of rescue by amphibious aircraft remote. While such a realization likely would have eased the conscience of RCN officials, the fact that a search was not initiated until 26 October nonetheless led to reprimands for both Goolden and Jermain.³⁰

On that score the Board was merciless. For his part, Jermain was held accountable because he had "failed to appreciate the necessity of HMCS *Bras d'Or* completing with coal on arrival at Sydney, and that on report of her non-arrival at Sydney by the NOIC Sydney's 1956, he did not immediately take steps to determine her position." Put another way, with only 110 tons of coal onboard, *Bras d'Or* did not have enough fuel for a round trip, and as such Jermain should have known that something was wrong when the *Bras d'Or* did not top up her bunkers in Sydney.³¹ But while Jermain was willing to accept the Board's conclusion, Goolden was not. Indeed, he had little trouble telling NSHQ exactly how he felt on the matter:

...the Board of Enquiry in which it is stated that "The Naval Officer in Charge, Sydney, did not fully understand his responsibilities nor had he apparently instructed his staff to keep the ship's movements continually under review as should be done" is not borne out by the facts. It is submitted that had he or his staff officer been called as a witness at the sitting of the board of Enquiry that it would have been firmly established that no such charge was justified. ...NOIC [Sydney] was not conversant with the orders issued to "*Bras D'or*" [sic] but was prepared to issue the orders as requested by NOIC Quebec when she [*Bras d'Or*] reported at Sydney [the order for her to return to Rimouski]. Had "*Bras D'or*" arrived

²⁹ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, Bidwell to DeWolf, 29 October 1940.

³⁰ DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, "Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*, 02 November 1940." For water temperatures, hypothermia indexes and the time of sunrise on 19 October 1940 see the following references: www.hypothermia.org/inwater.htm ; <http://mach.usno.navy.mil/cgi-bin/aa-pap;www.osl.gc.ca>.

³¹ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/76, NCSO Quebec to NOIC Sydney, 1650/21 October 1940, and NOIC Sydney to NCSO Quebec, 1956/21 October 1940.

at Sydney her arrival would have been reported to all the authorities concerned.³²

That he had not been allowed to defend himself, along with the fact that he was being held responsible for a situation beyond his control, was greeted with some sympathy in the COAC's office. Certainly, the Signal Staff Officer, Lieutenant-Commander G.A. "Sam" Worth, RCN, was not afraid to say as much when he penned a pithy note to the COAC that "NSHQ should provide Sydney with a crystal ball for these occasions."³³ NSHQ, however, was not nearly so forgiving.

Unlike the *Fraser I Bras d'Or* collision report, Rear-Admiral Reid, who was now the deputy chief of the naval staff in Ottawa, upheld the Board's findings by telling the chief of the naval staff (CNS), Rear-Admiral Percy W. Nelles, RCN, that: "I am not in agreement with his [Goolden's] statement that he fully understood his duties and responsibilities and that they were carried out. ... On receipt of this [the signal from Quebec for *Bras d'Or* to return to Rimouski] the Naval Officer in Charge [Sydney] must then have known that *Bras d'Or* should have been in his area and he already knew that she had been shadowing *Vlassopol*. If he had then taken the action which he took 4 days later... it would have been known on the 21st that something was wrong and in consequence a search initiated then."³⁴ For Reid the loss of *Bras d'Or*, while a horrible tragedy, had at least exposed serious shortcomings in the operational organization as well as lines of communications between the Quebec and Sydney sub-commands. As such, he was satisfied with that aspect of the investigation. So, too, was Nelles, particularly since it led to new routing procedures designed to prevent a similar situation from developing in the future. Nonetheless, while the Judge Advocate General believed that this particular Board of Inquiry was a prime example of how an investigation should be run, the CNS had reservations about their conclusion on the cause of the loss, which he saw as but "one solution of the mystery."³⁵

Nelles was not the only one to have doubts. Twenty-one years later, the department's official naval historian, E.C. Russell, argued that the board's findings on this point were based on "scanty evidence;" and because of that he wanted the navy to locate and investigate the *Bras d'Or* wreck.³⁶ His suspicions were well founded, and this is where the historical record needs clarification; particularly since their conclusions cast doubt on *Bras d'Or's* ability to weather the Gulf of St Lawrence's turbulent winter environment.

An inspection of the *Vlassopol's* hull quickly ruled out the navy's original suspicion that the Romanian merchantman had either accidentally collided with, or even purposely rammed, *Bras d'Or* at sea.³⁷ Accordingly, the Board speculated in a different direction as

³² NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, NOIC Sydney to Naval Secretary, 29 December 1940.

³³ Memo sheet attached to Op Cite.

³⁴ DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, Reid to Nelles, 06 January 1941.

³⁵ DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, Orde to Nelles, 18 November 1940; Nelles to Macdonald, 22 November 1940.

³⁶ DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13 File 3, E.C. Russell to A/CNP (A), 29 March 1960; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 7, Russell to Naval Hydrographer, 05 October 1961.

³⁷ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, NSHQ to NOIC Sydney, 1309/30 October 1940.

they determined that extreme weather was the primary cause for the loss. In reality, they had erred and the CNS knew it. Mistaking local time for Greenwich Mean Time, the weather reports entered into evidence actually indicated that the storm had not yet arrived, explaining why Nelles told the minister that conditions were "quite normal" at the time of the sinking. This is reinforced by the *Vlassopots* log, which observed that both seas as well as winds were "moderate" in "clear visibility" at 0435 and only began to "deteriorated rapidly later in the morning watch."³⁸ As a result, what the Board interpreted as a contributory factor probably had more to do with her fate.

Given that weather conditions were moderate, the potential structural damage from an incident the previous night may well have come back to haunt the ship to a greater extent than previously believed.³⁹ In the course of their investigation, the Board discovered evidence that *Bras d'Or* had grounded on a mud and rock bottom approximately two hundred yards off the wharf at Rimouski just after setting out for Clark City. There she stayed with an appreciable list to port for some four and a-half-hours until the flooding tide re-floated her sometime after midnight on the 18th. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the *Bras d'Or's* hull may well have suffered a strain that subsequently led to its rupture twenty-eight hours later. Yet that was not the only odd thing to happen at Rimouski.

Prior to slipping, Hornsby had requested that an engineering officer, Lieutenant(E) M. Cumming, RCNR, be sent to his ship to investigate serious defects with the ship's engine and boilers. Other than a signal indicating that he was making "observations, repairs, and adjustments," exactly what Cumming did once he embarked remains a mystery. But Hornsby was worried that the engine was going to be under considerable strain - the *Vlassopol* had a one-knot advantage over *Bras d'Or* - and he subsequently asked Cumming to sail for the duration of the operation. That this occurred independently from the grounding is intriguing, as is the fact that a report submitted after *Bras d'Or's* summer refit observed that a "proper inspection" of the engine and boilers "could not be carried out" because of the need to get her back on operations.⁴⁰

Unaware of these details, the Board never explored the possibility that some type of serious engine room malfunction might have played a role in the loss. But while it cannot be ruled out as a potential cause, there is good reason to doubt that the mysterious engine and boiler defect sealed the ship's fate. For example, according to one account, Chief Engine Room Artificer Ernest Jones, "had been transferred to the mine sweeper previous to the Nova

" NAC, RG 24 Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, NOIC Sydney to Captain C.R.H. Taylor, 29 October 1940; "Weather Report for 19 October 1940; Nelles to Macdonald, 26 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11506, "Storm Warning," nd.

" DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, "Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*," 02 November 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol 11031, COAC 14-A-5, "Extract from a memo received from Mr. P.L. Collier to Mr. J.A. Hanrahan," 05 November 1940.

⁴⁰ NAC, RG 24, Vol 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, NOIC Quebec to CO HMCS *Bras d'Or*, 15 October 1940; RG 24, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, EC Armstrong to NOIC Quebec, 07 September 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11491, MRC 45, Various maintenance reports, various dates; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3FB, "Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*," 02 November 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, Latchmore to SO, 18 October 1940.

Scotia trip to take charge of a routine check-up before she set out. The pumps were overhauled and the engines [sic] checked, and on the subsequent trial on the St Lawrence, she proved up perfectly. He had been with the men all one Sunday, while she cruised 30 miles down the St Lawrence and back."⁴¹ Yet another report told a similar tale as the company responsible for the refit, Morton Engineering and Dry Dock, wrote to Jermain arguing that "in our opinion the Hull, Boiler and Engine of this vessel was in first call condition." It should be noted, however, that a reference to the engine was conspicuously absent when this report concluded with "we had occasion to examine the hull and boiler of this vessel."⁴² Still, the chances that the ship suffered such a catastrophic engine failure at sea remains remote, as the subsequent explosion surely would have been seen, or at least heard, given the *Vlassopots* close proximity to *Bras d'Or*.

Initially, there were other aspects of the sinking that were equally intriguing. Certainly, unconfirmed reports of a third ship in the area raised a few eyebrows within NSHQ, the more so since a departmental letter later suggested *Bras d'Or* was "lost as the result of enemy action." The identity of that ship was never confirmed. However, a close study of German U-boat and surface raider locations, along with an understanding of governmental financial regulations, indicate that the latter reference was simply a means by which the navy could write off a large part of the *Bras d'Or's* true value to the Department of Transport.⁴³ Acts of "piracy" on a merchant ship off the southern tip of Anticosti Island two days before the sinking was also an instant attention grabber. Upon closer examination, the ship that was "being overpowered by local pirates" was the SS *Incemore* which, having run aground on 15 September, was an easy target for "fishermen [who] have been making a 'good thing' out of this wreck."⁴⁴ Certainly men sailing up to the *Incemore* in their schooners to pilfer cargo were not the types to take on a warship in the early morning hours of 19 October. That some at NSHQ entertained such far-fetched notions, albeit briefly, was the product of a sinking that had failed to yield a single piece of debris. Neither the locating of two small craft believed to be the warship's lifeboat, nor the grisly discovery of a human leg with "sox and boot thought to be of naval issue," were actually connected to the *Bras d'Or*.⁴⁵ Further adding to the mystery, were ghostly stories of a relay station on Anticosti

⁴¹ Comments by Ernest Jones as recorded in The Evening Telegram, 25 January 1941.

⁴² NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, Morton to Jermain, 30 October 1940.

⁴³ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, NOIC to Sydney to Captain C.R.H. Taylor, 29 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, NS 8000-441/78, W. G. Mills (Deputy Naval Minister) to National Defence for Naval Services, 26 September 1946; DHH, 79/446, Vol. 2, BdU Op's War Log for the month of October 1940; DHH, U-Boats, 81/520/1650, File 24, Reports of Submarine Sightings, October 1940; DHH, 181.002 (D139), and 181.002 (D176) German raiders, various dates on RCAF files.

⁴⁴ DHH, 74/157, "Ships lost in the St Lawrence rive and Gulf, 1896 up to date," [circa 1965]; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6824, 406/12, COAC to SNO Gaspe, "Incemore [sic] Overrun with Pirates," 1159/21 October 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-14, Vol. 1, "Weekly Summary for Senior Officers, No. 29," 28 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6778, NSC 8181-5809, "RCMP Report," 02 January 1941; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, SO Sydney to SSO, 1629/29 October 1940.

⁴⁵ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, NOIC Sydney to COAC, 1216/26 October 1940; NOIC Sydney to COAC, 2117/26 October 1940; NOIC Quebec to NSHQ, 1543/4 November 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, COAC to NOIC Gaspe, 1601/30 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11034, 14-A-67. COHMCS

Island having received a faint wireless signal from a ship using the *Bras d'Or* call letters (CGDK) two days after she went under.⁴⁶ Unlike the grounding and engine troubles, all these tales can be dismissed easily. What is more difficult to understand, however, is why the ship continued with her mission given that she had touched bottom and was also experiencing some type of mechanical problem in Rimouski.

For at least one officer who knew him well, Hornsby's decision to sail after grounding was uncharacteristic of a man he described as a "cautious and capable seaman." Indeed, possessing a master foreign-going Board of Trade Certificate, and having served on two other warships before taking command of the *Bras d'Or*, Hornsby was no amateur. Yet the Board came to a slightly different conclusion. No one doubted that he was a "thoroughly capable" officer, yet he was also zealous; and that zeal had, in the Board member's opinion, clouded his judgement.⁴⁷ Perhaps to some degree that was true, but such a parochial interpretation did not reflect the tremendous pressure Hornsby was under to get the job done.

Receiving orders via shore-based telephone gave Hornsby the opportunity to get elaborate details that were not normally included in wireless messages. Having been told that the nearest naval assists were some ninety-six miles away, he knew that his ship was the only one that could get to the port before the *Vlassopol* sailed. Naval authorities in Quebec, along with civilian officials at the Gulf Pulp and Paper Company in Clark City, had conspired to delay the Romanian freighter from her scheduled departure on the night of 17 October. Their elaborate ruse, however, was less likely to work the longer it took *Bras d'Or* to get there and so Hornsby was informed, in no uncertain terms, that time was of the essence.⁴⁸ The Gulf Pulp and Paper Company representative tasked with delaying the *Vlassopol* later told his boss that "when I met with the officer [presumably Hornsby] I remarked that he was late, that we had expected him at 8.00 A.M. he answered 'Yes, I know - we ran aground last night, that is what delayed us.'" ⁴⁹ Time was crucial and as such it is not difficult to imagine how Hornsby felt when the grounding put the plan to stall the *Vlassopol* six hours behind schedule. Moreover, the fact that this plan had originated with the director of naval

Vison to Commander in Charge Halifax, Report of Proceedings for 16 October to 17 November 1940. The first craft had washed ashore and was found by the RCMP. A serial number (X X828-3) on the hull allowed for a quick determination that it did not belong to the *Bras d'Or*. Likewise, COAC tasked *Vison* to search for the second reported craft. Near the specified co-ordinates, *Vison* did discover what was described as a "small fishing flat or boat... at a distance [it] did have the appearance of a lifeboat, but was of no value and contained no equipment."

⁴⁶ This story appears to have ballooned from a signal sent from Sydney that "Our wireless log shows CGSK called VCZ Ellis Bay Anticosti at approximately 0105 GMT October 21". Signal was weak and inference bad. Cannot locate ship with call sign CGSK. Suggest possibly might have been CGDK (*Bras d'Or*)." NAC, RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 1156-441/78, SO Sydney to SSO, 1620/29 October 1940.

⁴⁷ NAC, Career Progression Chart, nd, Hornsby Personnel file, 0-34163, (DOD 19 October 1940); NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, NS 8000-441/78, K. S. Maclachlan to T.F. Mitchell, 03 December 1940; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, "Commander F. A. Price, RCNVR, testimony," Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*, 02 November 1940.

⁴⁸ NAC RG 24, Vol. 4109, NSC 441/78, W.J.G. Carr, "*Bras d'Or* Incident," 30 October 1940; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 13, File 3, "Board of Inquiry into the disappearance of HMCS *Bras d'Or*," 02 November 1940.

⁴⁹ RG 24, Vol. 11031, COAC 14-A-5, P.L. Collier to J.A. Hanrahan, 05 November 1940.

intelligence at NSHQ undoubtedly added to the sense of urgency, as did rumours that the *VlassopoF's* captain had every intention of breaking for South America.⁵⁰ But there can be little doubt that the impression that the *Bras d'Or* was the only ship that could prevent the Romanian freighter from doing so, was what had the greatest impact on Hornsby.

In reality, however, the navy did have options. Believing that he could no longer keep up the pretense, one of the civilian officials had come clean with the *VlassopoTs* master by telling him the real reason his ship was being delayed. The RCN had no idea that this man had done so, and therefore was also unaware that the *Vlassopol* was willingly waiting for their naval escort. Likewise, it was not until after the sinking that naval authorities in Quebec learned HMCS *Vison*, which had been transferred from Halifax to the base at Gaspé on 18 October, was also in a position to intercept the freighter.⁵¹ Whether Hornsby would have continued with his mission had he known these details will forever remain a mystery, but the pressure for him to go to sea certainly stands as an illustration of how much the navy relied on the auxiliary vessels during the early stages of the war.

Designed for civilian purposes, the auxiliaries were far from ideal warships. In fact, even those who sailed in them had a tendency to complain about their seaworthiness. A veteran from another vessel was not mincing his words when he observed: "That ship should never have been at sea. She had no [watertight] bulkheads. Anytime the 4-inch gun was fired everything of glass in the ship broke."⁵² Yet, despite chronic maintenance requirements from constant sea patrols and the fact that some were literally worn out, these small ships did not suffer undue losses. Out of forty auxiliaries only *Bras d'Or* and HMCS *Adversus*, which ran around in a blizzard, were lost on active duty.⁵³

The same was also true for the armed yachts, which in many respects were close to the auxiliaries. They likewise suffered only two losses out of a fleet of sixteen vessels: HMCS *Otter* was destroyed in an accidental fire, and HMCS *Raccoon* was torpedoed by *U-165*. They, too, had their detractors as a number of individuals also questioned their relative seaworthiness. Indeed, four yachts, HMC Ships *Vison*, *Reindeer*, *Husky* and *Elk*, were all damaged in the storm that was originally credited with sinking *Bras d'Or*, which led the COAC to the conclusion that "vessels... built for pleasure purposes and for use in calm waters, are unsuitable for convoy during winter months." That opinion was then tempered by his next remark that "they are, however, useful auxiliary craft for local patrol duties and

⁵⁰ In actuality, the navy had little to fear. The captain, Nondas Cominos, was a Greek national who, it was later discovered, was "strongly anti-german [sic]."

⁵¹ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11034, File 14-A-67, HMCS *Vison*, "Report of Proceedings for October, 18 November 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-17, Gaspé Naval Base, "Report of Proceedings for October 1940," 2 November 1940.

⁵² DHH, BIOG E, Hal Lawrence, Report of Interview with Lieutenant-Commander William Evans, RCNVR, Vancouver BC, circa 1982.

⁵³ McKee and Darlington, *Naval Chronicle*, 248-249; Burgess and MacPherson, *The Ship's of Canada's Naval Forces*, 143-155.

for use in enclosed waters."⁵⁴ Nonetheless, due to a shortage of warships in the early stages of the war, both the auxiliaries and armed yachts were in high demand. During the winter of 1940 the British commander-in-chief American West Indies (CinC AWI) virtually begged NSHQ to supply him with as many of these types as possible because he was "seriously concerned about the situation regarding A/S vessels at my disposal." Showing that NSHQ was unwilling to take unnecessary risks, they agreed to send HMC Ships *Elk*, *Husky*, and *Vison* to Bermuda because "these are the only three at present available which are sufficiently seaworthy for ocean passage." That these ships were also popular in Canada was abundantly clear when Nelles personally responded to a March 1941 inquiry from the CinC AWI to extend their duty in the Caribbean with, "regret circumstances compel me to request the return of HMC Ships 'Elk' 'Husky' and 'Vison.'"⁵⁵

It is obvious, therefore, that both the auxiliaries and armed yachts were much needed at this time and according to the CNS, the *Bras d'Or* was as good as any other "and as far as is known was quite seaworthy."⁵⁶ Rear-Admiral L. W. Murray best captured the pivotal role the auxiliaries played in the early defence of Canada, remarking that they were taken in hand as, "temporary ships to hold the fort until our corvettes were ready," and "the majority did remarkably well."⁵⁷ Largely due to their efforts along with the RCN's original pre-war fleet of thirteen ships, the fort held, and perhaps that provides the most basic answer to the question of whether *Bras d'Or* belonged at sea. The same was also true for the reservists who manned them. Upon first joining the navy, the vast majority of RCNVRs were "amateurs." But like those on the *Bras d'Or*, they were keen learners who were quickly brought up to speed by their ex-merchant marine counter-parts in the RCNR as well as the RCN regulars on board. And so while the ship was involved in incidents (such as the *Fraser* collision) that exposed certain animosities between these branches, the *Bras d'Or's* ship's company had proved over and over again that they were both competent and extremely professional. So, too, had their colleagues in the other auxiliaries. Pressed into a naval service desperately short of warships, these vessels and their reserve crews were guarding the East Coast well before either the corvettes or even the armed yachts had arrived, and for that they deserve recognition.

As for *Bras d'Or's* ultimate fate, she was by no means the RCN's worst disaster throughout 1940. The sinking of the destroyers *Fraser* and *Margaree* claimed more lives. But *Bras d'Or* is the one with the most unanswered questions. In the end, however, weather conditions were not the primary cause of her loss as previously believed. Instead, her

⁵⁴ DHH, 8000 on file HMCS *Reindeer*, extract from COAC report, 22 October 1940; NAC, RG 24, Vol. 11034, File 14-A-67, CO HMCS *Vison* to SNO Gaspé, 06 November 1940; DHH, 81/520/1000-5-13, Vol.3, NOIC Halifax to COAC, Information Concerning Port Sydney, 06 November 1940.

⁵⁵ DHH, 81/520/8000, Armed Yachts, NSHQ to CinC AWI, 1518/6 December 1940, and CinC AWI to NSHQ, 122/24 December 1940, and CNS Canada to CinC AWI, 1206/25 March 1941; DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 108, File 7, HMCS *Vison*, Various documents and dates.

⁵⁶ NAC, RG 24, Vol. 6718, NS 8000-441/78, Nelles to Macdonald, 26 October 1940.

⁵⁷ DHH, BIOG M, Rear-Admiral L. W. Murray, recollections of his naval career recorded on tape at DHH, Ottawa, May 1970; DHH, 8000, HMCS *Otter*, Part of Murray's quotation was cited from Russell to Military Secretary, 20 July 1964.

disappearance remains unresolved; and perhaps because of that the *VlassopTs* second officer's observation still applies to this day: on 19 October 1940, HMCS *Bras d'Or* had simply "put her lights out."