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THE PRINCE SHIPS 1940-1945

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PART I: Acquisition and Arming of HMC Ships PRINCE DAVID, PRINCE HENRY and PRINCE ROBERT.
Armed Merchant Cruiser Operations 1940-1943.

The Great War of 1914-1918 brought back an aspect of sea warfare that had not been seen on a large scale since the blockade of France in Napoleonic times. The destruction of enemy commerce, that largest and most important component of seapower, became a prime purpose of Germany in 1914, and to this end she developed the U-boat and the surface raider. This latter weapon is of particular interest in the history of ship design, for like commerce raiding itself, the surface raider was a full-fledged return to past principles. With the coming of iron ships, steam propulsion and technological advances in ordnance, the roles of warship and merchantman, once fundamentally similar and practically interchangeable, drifted apart. In general, steam meant speed and manoeuvrability for the man-of-war, power and endurance for the merchantman.

This disparity between the two was not as pronounced by the turn of the twentieth century as it had been fifty years earlier, however, for the continuing improvements in shipbuilding which had originally bred separation of types evolved two classes of merchant ship which could be converted for naval purposes. These were some cargo ships, and fast passenger liners. Cargo carriers, if they had uncommon endurance, could be handily armed as surface raiders and sent out on prolonged cruises prosecuting warfare against commerce far from any friendly base. Their appearance, inherited from peacetime occupations, gave them the positive advantage of a natural disguise--and one easily made greater by such tricks as telescopic funnels and masts. Many passenger liners were also vessels of great endurance, whose speed compared favourably with that of contemporary warships. They could become armed merchant cruisers, to either protect or destroy trade. World War I showed conclusively that both types were valuable assets to seapower, on both sides.

The lessons learned from the First War were not forgotten by the Admiralty, nor by the Germans. The development of military aircraft since the Great War would necessitate different tactics and armament, of course,

but the converted merchantman was expected to serve roughly the same purposes, in a future war, as it had in the previous one. In the event, Germany in World War II sent into the world's oceans nine converted cargo vessels as surface raiders, about one-third of the number planned, and the Royal Navy made no fewer than fifty liners into merchant cruisers.^{1.} For its part, the Canadian Government converted three. Commissioned in the Royal Canadian Navy, these three were, for most of the war, Canada's only large warships. At the time, they were without precedent in the young fleet; looking back over more than a half-century of RCN history, they are still without peer; and this narrative is their history.

To meet any future requirements involving armed merchant cruisers or surface raiders, the Admiralty had listed the ships most suitable for conversion and had made arrangements with their owners whereby they would be turned over to the naval authorities on the outbreak of war. This policy echoed across the Atlantic. It was expected that the Royal Navy might wish to use facilities at Halifax, Montreal or Esquimalt for some of these conversions--machinery and manpower requirements had to be foreseen. As well, some Canadian officers pondered the clear advantage of getting warships in a similar fashion, for this country's navy, without having to build them. Here, the choice of suitable ships was limited; while many filled the specifications for size and endurance, few had the necessary speed. For those that did fit the bill, the RCN had no long-term, clearly defined policy of acquisition in case of hostilities. There was, however, an incipient tendency towards such a policy. The question came up in 1937, when Greece negotiated with Canadian National Steamships for that company's fast passenger liners PRINCE DAVID, PRINCE HENRY and PRINCE ROBERT. According to a memorandum dated 4 September, 1942, the Chief of Naval Staff opposed that sale on the grounds that the 6,900 ton Prince ships were potential armed merchant cruisers, and would be of value to Canada in the event of war.^{2.} The sale foundered, partly on this objection, and partly because the terms did not particularly appeal to Canadian National Steamships. A new threat developed in 1938, when the company tried to sell

two of the Princes to Turkey. Two factors were responsible for the ensuing interest in the ships; the urging of CNS that they be retained, and the strong recommendations of the Honorary Naval Advisory Committee, composed of reserve officers and intended to give counsel on the strengthening of Canada's sea defences. Both parties submitted briefs to the Minister of National Defence urging that the Princes should not be sold out of Canada. It was argued that while they were uneconomical ships from the standpoint of their owners, the very speed which made them uneconomical was fundamental to naval needs. They could be employed as troop ships or armed with 6-inch guns for defence or offence against surface ships. The Chief of Naval Staff's memorandum of 13 December, 1938, stated that they ". . . could in an emergency be made very useful for service on the East or West Coast if we could obtain the armament for them".³

It is not known what action was taken on the matter, but it is a fact that the Princes were not sold out of Canada. An official of the Canadian National Steamship stated later that the company had been "prevented from selling them".

The Prince ships were built at Birkenhead in the United Kingdom by Cammell Laird for the Canadian National Steamships Company. They had been laid down in the prosperous years before the depression of the 1930's, and were commonly referred to as "Sir Henry Thornton's last extravagance". Their three funnels, three decks, cruiser sterns and accommodation for more than 300 passengers classed them as small luxury liners. When completed in 1930 they had cost \$2,000,000 each. They were identical in every respect and were designed for fast passenger service off the British Columbia coast. However, the decline in trade that followed made it impracticable for all three to be operated on the West Coast; PRINCE DAVID and PRINCE HENRY were sent back east for the Canada-West Indies service. The former had an interesting, if somewhat erratic career with Canadian National Steamships, making charter cruises as far away as Alaska. In 1932 she ran aground on the North-East Breaker at Bermuda and remained fast for six months. Her salvagers found that the cheapest course was to turn her back to Canadian

National Steamships, who subsequently got her off and refitted her for another four years' service. In 1937 she was laid up at Halifax.

The decline in trade also affected PRINCE HENRY, who was laid up alongside PRINCE DAVID at Halifax from 1937 to 1938 and then sold on a mortgage to the Clarke Steamships Company of Montreal. She was renamed the NORTH STAR and was put in service between Montreal and Botwood, Newfoundland, sailing chiefly as a tourist liner. She could not be sold without the approval of Canadian National Steamships, and consequently she was still available to the government in an emergency. These two Princes were the most prominent white elephants in the depression-shackled shipping trade. As for the PRINCE ROBERT, she proved both popular and profitable, and remained on the West Coast until the outbreak of war, ferrying tourists to and from Alaska. She was in better shape than her sister ships, having been well taken care of, but all three promised to be valuable auxiliaries, their engines were reportedly in good operating condition, and a speed of twenty-two knots made them among the fastest ships in Canadian registry.

When war broke out in September of 1939, the Naval Service lost no time in making arrangements for the conversion of the Princes. The only urgent problem was supplying armament for them, and on 9 September the Admiralty was asked if it would provide the necessary guns and anti-submarine equipment. The Admiralty had a supply of armed merchant cruiser equipment in storage at Esquimalt, and it was thought that the Princes could be supplied from this stockpile. In reply the Admiralty stated their agreement to the arming of two Princes, but did not think it wise to arm three when a larger and more powerful ship might become available and require the remaining equipment. The Naval Service then decided to convert PRINCE DAVID* and PRINCE ROBERT, since these ships were owned outright by Canadian National Steamships and their requisition or hire would present few problems. It was still hoped to convert the NORTH STAR, ex-PRINCE HENRY, but her requisition depended on a change of mind at Whitehall.

*An interesting event of PRINCE DAVID's career, before conversion, is described in a footnote on page 117 below.

