

# WAR OF THE TRIBALS

Dunkirk, Norway, Malta, Greece, Crete, the Murmansk convoys, the Altmark incident and the tracking of the Bismarck — Britain's Tribal-class destroyers were sent again and again into the hottest, most desperate areas of the Second World War

BY NEIL HECKMAN

The decade preceding the outbreak of the Second World War found senior members of the Royal Navy glancing about at the newer, bigger destroyer classes being launched in foreign yards — perhaps to serve in fleets that might soon be in conflict with Britain. British destroyer types of the late 1920s and early 1930s were still representative of the best in small ship design, and British shipyards still built destroyer types for many of the world's smaller navies, but these ships remained of certain basic design and did not radically alter to accommodate innovations of strategy, particularly range and armament.

HMCS *Athabaskan* (R-79), a *Tribal*-class destroyer in rough weather.



The *Tribals* were an extremely attractive class of destroyers.

The Royal Navy, as usual, was forced by the tight purse-strings of the Exchequer to await the final moments of peace, indeed, the first moments of war to state their needs. The lead time required by overburdened shipyards was to create a gap that was barely filled by the one



During the Korean War, HMCS *Haida* earned the title of "trainbuster." The Trainbuster's Club was started by the USS *Orleck*. It succeeded in destroying two supply trains in a two-week period

new class of destroyer in commission when the bombshell of war exploded. These were the *Tribal*-class.

Earlier classes of the decade suffered from an Admiralty policy of dual-mission roles — they were also expected to act as Fast Minesweepers (perhaps an anachronism from their First World War role as escorts to massive battle fleets). As a result, the *C*, *D*, *E*, *F*, and *G* classes were to suffer impairment of their anti-submarine and anti-aircraft weaponry, and research, thereof, that would bring about the heavy losses among these ships early in WWII. Like the rest of Britain and her military, they were unprepared and

ill-equipped to learn the harsh lessons Hitler's new warfare would painfully offer. Until the destroyer classes of 1931/1932, for example, no British destroyer had an effective fire-control director... much less effective surface-to-air or anti-submarine equipment. Thus, it was that the *Tribals* were finally introduced to the Royal Navy — seven being included in the 1935 estimates as the Admiralty's solution to the need for a heavier, more powerful destroyer. Trials having been completed on the first twin 4.7-in gun mounting ever designed for destroyers, it was decided to fit four of these mountings on the new *Tribals*, and halve the torpedo armament from eight to four tubes — nothing less than a revolutionary step for the Royal Navy. Of approximately 2500-tons full load, an overall length of 377-ft, and a beam of 36.5-ft, their twin shafts developed 44,000-shp from three Admiralty-type three-drum boilers and Parsons Single Reduction Geared Turbines, and the *Tribals* could be driven at a respectable 35-kts.

Their construction, following policy, was spread out over several shipyards, from Vickers in Tyneside, to the yards of Alexander Stephen, and the order for the

HMCS *Haida* preserved at Hamilton, Ontario.

