

HMCS Kootenay

23 October 1969

WE ARE AS ONE

On 23 October 1969, Kootenay lost nine of her own in one of the worst peacetime disasters suffered by the Canadian Forces. She was westbound out of the English Channel in a Task Group with Bonaventure, Terra Nova, Fraser, St-Laurent, Ottawa, Assiniboine, Margaree and Saguenay. By today's standards, it was a huge and powerful group. 200 miles west of Plymouth, Kootenay and Saguenay were detached to conduct routine full power trials. At 0810, the order "Full Speed Ahead Both Engines" was given, Kootenay surged forward.

The Engineer Officer, Lt(N) Kennedy, had just come back down to the Engine Room after a quick visit to the Boiler Room. The Chief ERA, CPO1 "Ski" Vaino A. Partanen, was on the deck plates with the watch. The Engine Room I/C, CPO2 W.A. "Billy" Boudreau, was there too. PO1 John MacKinnon was at the starboard throttle, PO1 Eric Harmon at the Port. LS Pierre Bourret was recording at the console while AB Michael Hardy and AB Allen Bell were recording the Main Engine temperatures for the trial. LS Gary Hutton had just taken the Torsion meter readings abaft the console while LS Tom Crabbe worked below on the Fire and Bilge pump.

At 0821, eleven minutes after the "Full Speed Ahead" order was given, disaster struck. A blast came from the after end of the Engine Room. Instantly the Engine Room was engulfed in flames. Kennedy and MacKinnon tried immediately to spin the throttles closed. The choice was to evacuate the Engine Room immediately or die. That first desperate effort would have an important effect. It would be found that they had miraculously managed to close both throttles about three or four turns each.

The fireball burst up through the after Engine Room hatch and filled Burma Road. The Main and C&PO's Cafeteria just above was also flooded with smoke almost immediately, trapping the Morning Watchmen still inside. Some of those in the Main Cafeteria got out by vaulting the galley counter. About fifteen of them, however remained there in the dense smoke until a Damage Control Party could get through to them. In AB Nelson Galloway's case this would come too late. He would be found later, collapsed by the Main Cafeteria, PO Stringer, trapped in the galley, would make it out only to die later of smoke inhalation and his injuries.

Kootenay was hurt, badly. The Captain, Cdr Neil Norton, would later write that a less professional crew could easily have finished the day in life rafts. The Chief ERA, was dead and too, as was most of the Engineroom Forenoon watch.

So suddenly had the carnage struck that the Boiler Room crew, just forward, was unaware of the damage. The Safety Valves had lifted briefly and the fires in the Starboard boiler were extinguished, but PO Bussiere immediately got them re-lit. Lacking any other orders, he kept his people close to the deck when the smoke came in, breathing through damp cloths as they maintained steam still driving the ship

onwards at better than twenty knots. At about 0900, forty minutes after the explosion, PO Bussiere tripped the Main Steam Stop Valves to the Engine Room. Even then, they didn't evacuate the space but continued to auxiliary steam to supply important steam driven alternators until they were assured that the diesel generators could take the load.

The fireball burned and charred the flats. A sizable bulge was now beginning to form in the ship's starboard side where the intense heat in the Engine Room deformed the very metal of the hull. In the Engine Room, the fire still raged. Kootenay's crew was fighting. CPO2 Hawkings got LS McLeod into a Chemox before diving down the hatch to start #1 diesel generator. WO Gerald Gillingham rushed in to take part in the rescue effort, perilously close to the heat and flame. The Cox'n had cleared the forward area of the ship and was heading aft. Before collapsing, the E.O., Lt(N) Kennedy made it clear to those on the bridge that it was imperative that the Emergency Shut-Offs in the flats had to be activated to stop the steam flow to the still charging engines.

SLt Reiffenstien, the navigator, was sent to check the after magazine spray located behind the Engine Room. When he returned, he asked if he could try to get to the Emergency Shut-Offs. With diving tanks, he crawled down through the passageway to find the box that contained the handles. In the heavy smoke, he couldn't see the locking levers that prevent accidental opening of the valves and his attempts to activate them were thwarted. But his bravery paid off, he found one man and got him forward to the wheelhouse and clear. Two other divers, SLt Cyril Johnston and SLt John Montague went forward to the Boiler Room.

The ship's firefighting organization was now in full force with one attack from forward led by Lt(N) Schwartz and another led by Commissioned Officer Moffat from aft. The sky was filled with helicopters bringing firefighting supplies and evacuating injured.

At 1015, one team with C2HT Robert George, entered the Engine Room, but intense heat forced them back. C2 George would stay in Chemox for several hours and keep fighting the fire until it was out and then help with the removal of the casualties. It would be another 45 minutes before they would gain entrance and be able to remain. At 1215, the Engine Room was finally cooled enough to allow for the grim assessment of the day's terrible cost.

When it was all over, the investigations determined probable cause to be a bearing that had been improperly assembled in the gearbox, robbing it of sufficient supply of oil to cool. The board, impressed with the heroism shown, went so far as to state that "No evidence of improper engineering practice by those serving in HMCS Kootenay has been found."