

CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

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J. Gordon Mumford. **The Black Pit...And Beyond**
(Burnstown, ON: General Store Publishing, 2000).
\$19.95 paper, 138 pages. ISBN 1-894263-19-7.

The title of this very interesting memoir refers to that area in the North Atlantic in which Allied convoys were out of range of covering aircraft, at least for part of the war. Mumford, an English teenager who joined the Merchant navy and became a radio operator, had the misfortune to be crossing the black pit before Allied air cover was extended. On Boxing Day 1942, his ship, the *Scottish Heather*, was torpedoed and most of the crew took to the lifeboats. They drifted for a full 24 hours before they were rescued by their own ship, which had been saved from sinking by a skeleton crew.

But this was not Mumford's only adventure. He later had an eventful tour of duty in the Mediterranean, and was then posted to a merchant ship operating in and out of the Scheldt estuary in late 1944. On Christmas Eve (Christmas seems to have been a season of misfortune for Mumford), his new ship *Empire Path* struck a mine off the Scheldt estuary and sank. This time, rescue vessels were near by and the survivors of the *Empire Path* barely got their feet wet.

Mumford's memoir is an excellent contribution to the literature of the naval war. He seems to have been naturally introspective rather than gregarious (a characteristic that might be traced to his brutal mistreatment at the hands of nuns and brothers in Catholic schools), and spent much of his free time exploring various ports on his own. His description of the supply operation into the Scheldt estuary also adds an interesting dimension to the history of that campaign.

The *Black pit* ends with Mumford receiving a posting as chief radio officer on a small tanker bound for operations under South-East Asia Command at Trincomalee. It is hoped that this will be the subject of the next volume of memoirs.

Cathy Tersch

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