

John Mason – Early Memories and WW 2

Earliest picture as a child with walking stick. Born in Winnipeg September 28th, 1923. At first we lived in an apartment on Ruby Street. One day I wandered off towards the gas works, fascinated by the big storage tanks. I didn't know I was lost until my frantic mother found me.

Later moved to Fort Garry. Went to General Steele School. Had a teacher called Miss Ablett. We said "Miss Ablett swallowed a tablet." Neighbour boy was Dickie Sutcliffe. His father was the colonel of the Winnipeg Grenadiers sent to Hong Kong in 1941, just before the Japanese invasion of the colony, where he was killed. Many years later, I visited his grave in the Commonwealth Cemetery there.

I had a little Boston Bulldog called "Tuggles." I liked to pull on his strap on a walk, and he would "tug."

We had a live-in Polish maid called "Rose" from whom I learned some Polish words. My father had built a small bedroom in the basement for her. We had a 1927 Chevrolet with wooden wheels. He didn't drive it in the winter, but took the battery out, drained it and put it on blocks in our back yard.

We lived on Somerset Avenue, with the Red River at the foot of the street. My friends Dickie Sutcliffe and Bob Turnbull and I would go fishing with a worms on hooks. In winter, we skated on the frozen river, in marked areas. My mother was a trained contralto soloist, and participated in concerts and sang in the church choir. I remember her having a main part in "The Pirates of Penzance."

My father and Uncle Howard May had a cut glass factory, with girls cutting glass in revolving sandstone wheels lubricated with water. On a visit one day, I discovered a little red tricycle. I wanted to keep it, but wasn't allowed to. Imagine my delight when it showed up under the Christmas tree a little later.

When the depression came in the early thirties, my father "lost his shirt" and we moved to Montreal, my mother, my infant sister Elizabeth and me. Dad followed a few months later in the Chevrolet, via mostly the USA, as not yet a trans-Canada highway.

We stayed in the East End, on Gauthier Street with my mother's parents until My parents could rent a flat on Bloomfield Avenue in Outremont. When the old East End Methodist Church closed down, my grandfather bought on of the pulpit chairs, which we have in our front hall today. There is a dent in it which they say I caused when I hit it with a toy wooden duck. My mother's brother, George was killed in WWI, and in later years we visited his grave in Ypres, being the first members to do so. In Outremont, I went to Guy Drummond School, entering in Grade 3, after my initial schooling in Winnipeg.

My friends included Peter Macaskiill, whom later became a minister, the Bode boys, Mel and Miles, Donald and George Urquhart.

I Joined the Wolf Cubs, and then the Boy, Scouts, and went to summer camp Tamaracouta in the Laurentians

After Grade 7, I went to Strathcona Academy, much further from home and was given a bicycle for transportation.

After 7 years in Montreal we moved to Toronto, as my father's business as an importer of china and glassware began to be more involved in that city. There I went to Lawrence Park Collegiate Institute, and continued Scouting activities. I played trumpet in the school orchestra, and in the cadet band, as it was war-time. I graduated from there in 1942, and joined the Navy in December of that year.

I Joined the RCNVR as a Stoker II class, and was sent to the ERA (Engine Room Artificers') School in Galt, ON. Here we learned machine shop practice, fitting shop practice, marine engineering, mathematics, welding and electricity. From there we went to Westdale Technical School in Hamilton to learn Internal Combustion Engines in classroom and shop. On December 13th 1943, we were drafted to Halifax to the MTE (Mechanical Training Establishment) for further- machine shop and fitting shop practice, marine engineering, moulding ship, sheet metal shop. We had our final exams in July, 1944, including a trade test consisting of a strange object called Nut, Block, Gib and Cotter. Ten we were off to sea, some soon, others, like myself, later.

I was drafted to HMCS Hochelaga 11, across the river from Montreal to stand by the commissioning of "Frigate 29", wherever that was. I spent several months there doing make-work jobs, parade training, etc. Finally we set off for Quebec City to commission HMCS Fort Erie. After several false starts on trials due to "condenseritis" we set sail for Halifax in October, hitting a severe storm in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This saw many seasick sailors, but I was one of those who withstood the weather remarkably well, although one had to hang on when moving about.

In November we went to Bermuda for work-ups" which, although taxing and tiring, was really a wonderful break: from the North Atlantic weather. Then into patrolling and convoy duties out of Halifax and St.John's NL. Mostly rough weather, action stations and boredom.

In April, I was promoted to ERA 4/c, and moved from the Stokers' Mess to the ERA' Mess. What a change! We had our own messman, no more cleaning bilges and boilers, for now we were Petty Officers. There is a picture of myself and another on the upper deck after we heard the War in Europe was over. It was hard to believe. And when we switched on Navigation Lights and upper deck lighting that night, it was rather startling, as I had never been at sea with upper deck lighting on. Previously one couldn't even dare light a cigarette for fear of being sighted by a U-Boat.

I had volunteered for the Pacific and the War against Japan, so was granted a month's leave. While on leave I received a telegram that I was to report to HMCS Antigonish, being tropicalized in Pictou, NS. But the war in the Pacific ended before we left Pictou. Instead, we made trips to Bermuda and St. John's to bring personnel home who had been safely stationed there during the war.

I was demobilized on December 12", 1945, and entered the University of Toronto to study Mechanical Engineering,. But that is the beginning of another story.