

WWII's longest battle felt in Kelowna - Daily Courier: News

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Brenton Harding | Posted: Tuesday, April 29, 2014 10:14 pm



| **Roy Harding** |

Editor's note: This weekend, services will be held to remember the Battle of the Atlantic and mark the 70th anniversary of the sinking of HMCS Valleyfield off of Newfoundland. Brenton Harding's uncle, Roy Harding, was a 19-year-old sailor from Kelowna who died that night aboard the Valleyfield.

Roy was a member of the prominent Harding family. His brother Ken was the Harding of Whillis-Harding Insurance, a major insurance agency in the Valley.

Brenton Harding's article below, draws our attention to the fact that though it took place on the other side of North America, the Battle of the Atlantic did touch

Kelowna. A young man died that night without ever being able to make the kind of contribution to Kelowna that his father and brothers did.

As a battle, it took place on history's largest battlefield and was the longest continuous campaign of the Second World War; the only battle to reach the shores of North America.

Even though it was taking place 5,000 kilometres away, the impact of the Battle of the Atlantic still touched Kelowna families like that of Percy and May Harding.

By the spring of 1943, one of the three eligible Harding boys, Terry, had joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and was headed east to fight the air war over Europe. Terry's 18-year-old brother, Roy, decided to join the Royal Canadian Navy.

Roy was active in sports in Kelowna, particularly gymnastics, and had swum across the lake on more than one occasion. Family photos were dotted with pictures of Roy and his latest hunting trophy.

Well known for his outdoor skills, Roy occasionally guided hunting parties including the odd Hollywood celebrity. He is reported to have been one of the first to venture into the Big White area.

When the province's forestry ministry began building lookouts near Big White, Roy was hired to protect the construction crews. Cougars had been a problem. Roy bagged at least one of the big cats near one site.

For Roy, the perfect summer job may well have been at Chapman's Cabins midway along the Big Bend Highway. The wilderness cabins offered overnight lodging for truckers driving the long, gravel road in the days before the Rogers Pass.

But that part of Roy's life was over when he shipped out for Vancouver and his navy training. Elsewhere, his fate was coming together.

That spring HMCS Valleyfield was being built at Quebec City. She went through her shake-down under Lt.-Cmdr. Dermot T. English and was commissioned in December, 1943.

One of four new River Class frigates built for the navy, Valleyfield and her sister ships were to be the very best, crammed with the latest submarine hunter-killer technology.

Across the Atlantic, in Hamburg, Germany, U-548 was finished and commissioned that same year and turned over to Kapitänleutnant Eberhard Zimmerman. In June his crew began training for their first patrol in March, 1944.

Back in Vancouver, Roy and his shipmates finished training that fall and were given leave. He returned to Kelowna to celebrate his 19th birthday in November before the journey east to join his new ship. His mother was delighted by the celebration, but would have preferred his being home for Christmas a few weeks later.

The family did take pleasure on learning Roy met older brother Terry for Christmas in Moncton, N.B., where Terry was stationed with the air force.

Joining the new frigate in February, 1943 Roy and his shipmates began working with their new ship carrying out convoy escort duties that took them to Britain, the Azores, and back to Canada.

Near midnight on May 6, 1944 Valleyfield and her sister ships were about 80 kilometres off Cape Race, Nfld., when they handed off their escort duties for in-bound convoy ONM-234. The ships began steaming for St. John's to await their next assignment.

While sailing astern of her sister ships, Capt. Zimmerman on U-548, spotted the frigate.

Roy had just come off watch and would have been in the crew spaces when general quarters sounded. Detection equipment indicated the presence of a submarine in the iceberg-infested waters.

The rush to battle stations had only started when one of U-548's torpedoes hit Valleyfield port side, midship, striking the boiler room.

Within four minutes Valleyfield had sunk. Her crew were either trapped on board or went into freezing water. (At 0 C, a person has about 12 minutes in the water before succumbing to hypothermia and drowning.)

The three other escort ships immediately came about, but rescue efforts were delayed while officers decided whether to hunt the U-boat or rescue sailors.

Nine days later, the government announced the sinking and the official count: of the Valleyfield's crew of 163 officers and men, 38 survived, 125 were dead.

Only 19 years old, Roy was gone. In spite of the terror that night 70 years ago, it could be said that Roy's life ended at a high point. The navy was without doubt his life's biggest adventure.

After the war, Capt. Zimmerman, commanding U-548 on its first patrol, said he would never have attacked Valleyfield had he known three other warships were in the area. Valleyfield would be his lone kill. Indeed, Valleyfield was the only one of the new frigates to be sunk during the Battle of the Atlantic.

And the fate of U-548? Zimmerman was transferred and the boat, with a new commander, returned to North American waters. In April of 1945, just weeks before Germany's surrender, she was hunting off Boston when she was attacked and sunk by two American warships.

At home in Kelowna, Roy's mother May mourned his loss for 30 years until her death in 1974. Terry returned from his air force service and passed away in Kelowna in 2006. Roy's brother Ken still lives in Kelowna. His younger sister, Joyce, lives in Calgary.

Brenton Roy Harding is Roy Harding's nephew.