

David William Law

V76192, Stoker First Class

Engineer's Writer, HMCS Ettrick

Why did you join the navy?

At the time, I was the youngest of three brothers. The eldest joined the army, the middle brother joined the air force, and I joined the navy. I'd never seen the ocean before but I figured that sailors either came back in one piece or they drowned and didn't come back at all. I preferred to drown than come back a cripple.

Where did you enlist?

I enlisted when I was 20 years old on Dec. 23, 1943, at HMCS Chippawa in Winnipeg and my active service started on December 29, 1943. I had been working in Winnipeg as a chemist at the Canada Metal Company, which was considered part of the war industry, so I didn't have to enlist but I did anyway. I didn't want to be a zombie. My new wife wasn't very happy about it. But I married her the month before I enlisted so that if anything happened to me, at least she would get a pension.

Where did you take your training?

My first course was at HMCS York in Toronto. They said that those who scored highest in the exam would be sent to a place close to home so I gave it my all and had the second highest mark in the class. They sent me to Vancouver. Since Vancouver was farther from Winnipeg than Toronto, I was a little surprised at my reward. However, the Pacific Ocean is closer to Winnipeg than the Atlantic.

What was your first night in Vancouver like?

When I arrived in Vancouver in March 1944, I reported to the navy office at HMCS Discovery on Deadman's Island. They said they didn't have any room for me in the Stanley Park Barracks so I should find a place by myself. I took my kit bag and walked over to a nearby Greek restaurant. When I mentioned my dilemma to a waitress there, she said to go over to Mrs. Switzer's rooming house across the way and she would find a bed for me. She did and I crawled into bed. When I woke up in the morning I found that I had a roommate, Bob Husband, from Delta, B.C. It was his room but he didn't mind sharing and we became good friends.

What did you do in Vancouver?

In Vancouver I worked in the training office doing the paperwork for new recruits who took their basic training there. I had taken typing and shorthand in high school so I guess that was why they assigned me clerical work. I was supposed to be there for six weeks. However, the six weeks passed and nobody took any steps to move me so I brought my wife out to Vancouver. She got a job right away at Woodward's and we set up housekeeping together in the rooming house. We didn't have much space and we cooked on a hot plate but we sure had a good time. I was there from March through October 1944. The weather was mild compared to Winnipeg and we enjoyed being near the ocean and Stanley Park.

How did you happen to leave Vancouver?

Well, a new boss took over. He called me in and asked me what the hell I was doing there as I was only supposed to be posted there for six weeks and I hadn't even had my basic training. I played innocent. He told me that I was to take the train for Nova Scotia the next day. I requested permission to stay a few more days as my wife would have to quit her job and pack up to move back to Winnipeg. He gave me 48 hours. My wife resigned her job and they had a big party for her at Woodward's. Then we shipped out by train.

So you arrived in Nova Scotia...

Yes, I was posted first to HMCS Cornwallis and then to HMCS Peregrine (Halifax) for additional training. Then I was posted to HMCS Stadacona (Halifax) and drafted to the HMCS Ettrick (K254) as the engineer's writer. She was a River class frigate, about 300 feet long and less than 40 feet at the beam, with a top speed of 19 knots. Her commander was Edward Middlemas More and she had a crew of about 133 men with eight officers. Frigates were specifically designed as anti-submarine escorts for trans-Atlantic convoys. River class frigates were designed for North Atlantic weather conditions and included the most effective anti-submarine sensors and weapons.

Where did the Ettrick sail?

The Ettrick escorted convoys on the Boston, New York, Halifax run and also patrolled the North Atlantic from Newfoundland to Iceland. I remember the anti-torpedo baffle or gate across the long, narrow St. John's Harbour that kept torpedoes from blowing it up. On Christmas eve 1944 the HMCS Clayoquot was torpedoed outside Halifax harbour. The Ettrick (this was a few days before I joined her crew) went out to search for survivors and the U-Boat. The survivors were rescued by the corvette, HMCS Fennel. When on actual convoy duty, we were under orders not to pick up survivors.

What was your role on the ship?

I was at sea from Dec. 29, 1944, to the end of the war. As the engineer's writer, I kept the records in a little office, maybe 6 feet by 10 feet, located on the stern deck. I worked alone and I ate and slept in there too so I didn't have much occasion to socialize with the rest of the crew. Maintenance was critical as there are no repair shops on the ocean. Every morning I had to check the pressure and lubrication on the steering apparatus. This involved crossing the deck, opening the hatch, taking the readings, closing the hatch and recrossing the deck to my office. I had to cross the deck between waves or the water would fill up the hatch and possibly sweep me overboard. The waves were sometimes 45 feet high and there wasn't much time between peaks, so I had to hustle. You get good at timing the waves...or else.

Did you ever get seasick?

I did at first but as my office was at the stern, the motion was less there than at the bow. Also, I was fortunate in that I could eat when my stomach was settled rather than at set times in the mess, which was located nearer the bow. I remember one poor chap. He was seasick from the get go and just lay in a life boat wrapped in a tarp for six weeks. You had to be sick for six weeks before the navy would acknowledge that you had motion sickness and transfer you to a land job.

Did you say that you slept in your office?

Yes, I slept on top of my desk. The Ettrick was a British ship and it had brass pin-up lamps attached to the wall on either side of the desk. I used to tie a rope around my waist and lash the ends to the lamp brackets so that I wouldn't fall off the desk when the ship rolled. As we had to be ready for action at all times, I slept in my clothes with my boots by my side.

How did you shower?

Shower, you must be kidding? We used a basin of water and wash cloth and took off just enough clothing to wash one part of our bodies at a time.

Did you have any close calls?

On January 14, 1945, we were part of a convoy of 19 ships coming in from Boston. Three major ships (British Freedom, SS Martin Van Buren, Athelviking) were sunk in the space of 13 minutes, with loss of life, by U-1232. The German Captain, Kurt Dobratz, thought he had hit a fourth ship but, in fact, he missed the Ettrick. Our ASDIC operator heard the torpedo coming in and informed the bridge. We turned to starboard and I saw the torpedo pass down our port side and strike another ship. We rammed the U-Boat's conning tower. It did not sink but was severely damaged. We also depth-charged the area. We ended up in dry dock for repairs.

Where were you when the war in Europe ended?

From the middle of January to April 1945 we had uneventful patrols. On May 8 we were escorting a three-tramp convoy when, two hours out of Halifax, we received a signal that the war in Europe was over. We continued to the Azores and the convoy carried on to its destination. Somewhere along the way, we dropped our ordnance overboard. We docked in Southampton. I remained there for a time to attend to some records but had some leave and was able to visit my mother's relatives in Haslemere, Surrey. I brought them some cheese, butter, a fresh pineapple, chocolates, a tin of chicken and some soap, a treat for which they were very grateful after the rationing and deprivations of the war. Then on May 31st, I took the bus up to HMCS Niobe at Greenock, Scotland. On June 11, 1945, I left Scotland for HMCS Peregrine on the corvette HMCS Rimouski. One incident from this voyage stands out in my memory. I was given a bunch of keys and told to match the keys to the locks on the ship's doors. An officer watching me asked what I was doing. After I explained, he took the keys from me and tossed them overboard.

When did you leave the navy?

I was stationed at HMCS Peregrine from the middle of June to the middle of September. While there, Mr. Taylor from the head office of the Canada Metal in Toronto called and wanted to know when I would be discharged. I told him I had no idea. He asked what I was doing. I told him that I was cleaning up the yard by spearing loose papers with a stick with a nail on the end of it. Mr. Taylor said he would get me home and back to my old job pronto. He pulled few strings and I soon found myself on the train for Winnipeg where I officially left the navy at HMCS Chippawa on October 23, 1945. My wife took my navy uniform and tossed it out. I would have like to have kept it, or at least the sailor hat, but she felt differently. I have a few mementos—photos of the Ettrick and my training class as well as my *Manual of Seamanship*, Vol. II. A few years ago, despite my protestations, one of my daughters

contacted Veteran's Affairs and they sent me my medals (the Atlantic Star, the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and the War Medal 1939-1945 with clasp).

How would you evaluate your war experience?

For a prairie boy of 22, my service in the navy enabled me to see quite a bit of my country and the world. I lived in or visited Toronto, Vancouver, Cornwallis, Halifax, St. John's, Boston, the Azores, Southampton, Haslemere, and Greenock. I had crossed my country by train, the Atlantic by sea, and England by bus. I learned about ships and experienced life at sea.

After the war, I was glad to have served my country, and especially glad to have survived, but mostly I tried to forget about it. I avoided travel by ship or train, as the smell of diesel reminded me of the war. In retrospect, it was a just war but there has to be a better way to resolve differences among countries.

Prepared by Lynda Diane Law
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