

The Wartime Service of William Robert Williams, V49134, CPO, RCNVR

Written by William Robert Williams

1942 Sep 8 Volunteered at Queen, the Reserve Division at Regina. Sep 28 enlisted as Ord. Smn. V49134. Nov 3 On Active Service. Eight weeks basic training then other duties. 1943 Apr 19 to Naden for new entry training and qualifying Seaman Torpedoman.

On our train trip to the west coast, at one of our first stops a friend took me up to the baggage car to meet his father, the baggage car conductor. He had an apple pie for us to share which we ate on our way to the next stop while sitting on a coffin (I don't know who was inside but they didn't complain). At the next stop we got off and headed back to our own car. We were met by the Leading Seaman in charge of our draft who was on his way to wire back that he had lost two men, he sent us back to our car and told to stay there for the night and not to pull a stunt like that again.

Oct 8 Combined Operations training at Goose Spit near Comox. Boat handling and piloting, combat and assault courses. We did a lot of running in the sand to toughen us up, unarmed combat and bayonet drill. Our commander demonstrated our skill to a visiting general by having one of the men charge at him. The man ended up on his back with the commander holding the rifle and pointing the bayonet at him. We found out later that the commander had been an Australian wrestling champion. This is the real beginning as we operated with Le Régiment de la Chaudière landing them on beaches, making sure they got wet so that there would be no surprises later. On one landing we hit a sandbar so we were in deeper water than it appeared, the first soldier off was a short man with a walky-talky on his back and he went straight to the bottom with only his antenna above water, no-one else stepped off and we all watched the antenna as it went towards shore. As he came out of the water a loud cheer went up, he was a hero!

I get leave from time to time and often I am in the beer parlour in Raymore where my uncle Jim hangs out. He was in the Royal Marine Artillery from 1894 to 1909 mostly serving in battleships in the Mediterranean. He was always saying that the Canadian Navy was only wishy-washy little ships and he served in real ships. I know he only meant it in fun but it always came up every time I was home.

Nov 28 to Stadacona in Halifax and boarded R M S Mauritania for passage to Liverpool. Meals were not all that good so as I was about to remark to the man next to me about the mutton I heard a couple of Australians discussing the very same thing and I decided to keep my mouth shut when one said at least this is better than those bloody Canadian wieners. The corned beef was OK because it was out of a can and they didn't have to cook it.

Dec 15 recorded as being attached to HMCS Niobe the Canadian shore base in Scotland but actually billeted in HMS Malaya, a 16 inch battleship, moored at Clyde Bank. We marched through the dark streets of Liverpool, cursed the cobblestones and laughed when we heard a tin hat clatter down the street after coming loose from a gas-mask pouch. We finally got to the railway station where we got tea from the ladies at a canteen on the platform. On the train we were issued a Cracker-Jack size box of US army K-ration for breakfast. Quite good, even two cigarettes to finish the meal.

We fell-in on a wharf to be checked off by an RN petty officer. It was quite a lark as there were several men of the same name and even the same rank so as a name was called the shout would go up 'Which One'. We speculated about that big ship out there and got a shock as the boats took us to the battleship.

1944 Jan 1 to HMS Dundonald (Dundonald Camp) Combined Operations base at Troon, Ayrshire, Scotland. During the war Britain was on 'Double Summer Time' all year round so it didn't get light until near 10 o'clock. The shortest way to the mess hall was across the parade square which had trucks, tanks and other armoured vehicles parked on it. This was an obstacle course when going for breakfast, or we could walk the long way around and maybe get lost.

We learned about LCI(L)s and sailed aboard one for a day. It was not a good day. We were grounded and another craft tried towing us off but the tow wire broke. Those of us on the stern dived for cover as the tow wire whipped around and it was a miracle that no-one was hit. The commander of the camp did not like Canadians as he had dealings with them before. At a daily parade someone did something for which he was to be escorted to the 'brig', the NPs were called but when they went for him the other Canadians told them to keep their hands off, there was a standoff for a while until the man in question said 'Lead the way and I will follow you'. Another time, it was Sunday Parade and as it was cold we all wore our greatcoats, this was not normal for Sunday inspection and only the Canadians wore them. Our officers came out and saw us and quickly went back to their quarters and put on their greatcoats to support us. When the commander asked who were those men he was told it was the Canadians so he said 'There will be no inspection today, we will go straight to church'

Dundonald Camp is adjacent to the famous Troon Golf Course so rather than going through the formalities of going through inspection at the infrequent times allowed to leave the camp we just went through the fence and across the golf course. Ayr was not a long walk. Coming back you would often be given a lift by a motorist going your way. To get back into the base we would just walk up to the hut where we were supposed to report and just as we got there ran right past. They would shout for us to stop but if there were several of us we would split up and go different directions. We had parade ground drill but it was hard to hear the instructor over the noise of the Mustangs which were flying overhead. We marched in threes so when we got the order 'About turn' one file turned right, one left and the centre turned about. The instructor ran in circles screaming 'Halt'. His next comment would be 'You Bloody Colonials'. This was the normal comment if anyone didn't conform to the British ways.

1944 Jan 25 commissioned HMC LCI(L)262 at Falmouth, Cornwall and became one of ten craft in the 262nd Canadian LCI(L) flotilla, 'J' Force, 'P' LCT Squadron. We took over from the RN who had just brought the craft from the Mediterranean. I hardly got to know the craft before I went to a RN auxiliary hospital in Newton Abbott to have my tonsils out. After this I had a weeks leave and finally got to London. I knocked on the door of my aunts house and when she opened the door she turned and cried out 'It's Bobby, he's home from Canada'. This was a normal reaction as England was 'home' for dad and mom and so naturally me. I had tried for leave at Christmas but only the British troops could get leave then. My Grandma had died on Feb 7 so I never got to see her. I was put in a combined ops manning pool but as I was a Canadian they wouldn't send me to my ship without authority from somewhere so I wrote

to the Capt.. of 262 and he got me out of there in no time. The craft was in Southampton and that's where I got confused by the numbers which Brian questioned. I finally found my craft and was back home. Southampton was to be our home port until after D-Day. We exercised with Canadian troops, landing them on local beaches. On weekends I usually went to London although we were not supposed to. Uncle Fred showed me around but he worried that I would forget to salute one of the many officers on the streets and get into trouble. He left me to find my own way back after I met some army and air force friends from back home in Canada.

While in Southampton we were visited by Vincent Massey, Canadian High Commissioner to Britain (1935-46). He came just at dinner time and went into the wardroom to see the two officers. He brought with him Lester Pearson, first secretary in the Canadian High Commission, who came down into our mess to speak to us. He wasn't highly welcomed as we were eating at the time so he didn't stay long.

Our craft were tied up four abreast along the wharf and one day we all had to get dressed in our blues all line up on the outboard craft to be reviewed by King George VI as he sailed past.

The 262nd Canadian LCI(L) flotilla consisted of LCI(L)s 115, 118, 135, 250, 252, 262, 263, 276, 299 & 306. These ships loaded troops on June 4 in Southampton. This was the 9th Infantry Brigade consisting of The Highland Light Infantry of Canada, The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders and The North Nova Scotia Highlanders. We left Southampton and sailed towards Portsmouth where we stayed to wait out a storm. We sailed again on the night of June 5/6 to cross the Channel.

In the early morning we circled off Normandy, 'Nan beach', we could hear the whistle and feel the concussion of the shells fired by the battle ships who were laying well behind us. Marine Commandos and Engineers were supposed to take and clear the beach but could not make it so the order came, 'Have a go, Canada' and we went in.

We, 262, made a clean landing, one of our men went down each ramp with a rope tied to the end of the ramp for the troops to steady themselves as they waded to the beach with 80 lb. packs and rifles. A piper led each column. The ship on our right had an obstacle directly in front of them so came alongside us to use our ramps and in doing so pushed us against a mine which blew a hole in the engine room. No-one was hurt as the three men below were between the engines and only got wet climbing out.

This was my baptism, I looked over the side and saw a dead soldier tethered to a small craft by a piece of rope, face down in the water. I felt that I knew him, I almost cried and I find that this is the hardest part of my story to tell. Tears are in my eyes now while I write this paragraph.

The troops from the other ship carried bicycles and after they were down a correspondent with a crate of pigeons and typewriter was the last to go so the captain detailed me to help him to the beach. He was more concerned about his typewriter than the pigeons getting wet. I never did find out who that correspondent was.

So I stepped ashore in France and there was a lot of shouting for me to get back which was slow going as I was waist deep in water. We were towed off and back to Portsmouth.

I was still underage to draw my tot of rum but that day I got a full mug. The tension being what it was it didn't even affect me.