

Remembering the Wavy Navy

by **Dan Connolly**

Each year on the anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic I pause to reflect on my dad, Frank Millar Connolly, and the many stories he told about serving on K179 HMCS Buctouche, a FLOWER CLASS corvette, in the North Atlantic. As kids we grew up with his very animated and dramatic tales around the dinner table of life in the Royal Canadian Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) or Wavy Navy as it was known.

He was 16 when he joined with his best friend, Tommy Gillis, in Montreal. They decided that the form-fitting Navy uniform would attract more girls than those of the other services and besides, as a child he had traveled across the Atlantic many times to Scotland with his mum and had fond memories of adventures on the Canadian Pacific liner Empress of Britain (later sunk by a German U-Boat). Most of the youngsters who sailed on corvettes had never been to sea. Thousands came from all parts of Canada in response to the call for volunteers.

The harsh reality of life on board a corvette was something he wasn't prepared for. Dad's descriptions of life in the fo'c'sle of a corvette in the rough seas of the North Atlantic sounded like something out of Dante's Inferno. He described the constant misery of being wet for days on end as water would sweep through the ship's ventilators and hatches, the seasickness, the constant rolling, the ever-present smell of seawater, diesel fuel, vomit and body odour all in the cramped confines of a space little larger than a good sized family living room and home to 80 men.

Despite their lack of comfort, they were very seaworthy little ships. Because of their rounded duck-like bottoms it was said that they would roll on dew. Their job was to escort and protect Britain's lifeline, convoys of merchant vessels containing vital supplies from Canada and the United States. My dad described the routine of convoy duty, keeping the ships in their proper place, watching out for stragglers, giving aid where needed, anticipating at any second, day or night, the inevitable alarm signalling an enemy contact and long hours at action stations, hunting their prey (German U Boat wolf packs). Although the sub crews were the enemy, dad often commented on how they couldn't help but feel sorry for the men in the sub as they were dropping a pattern of depth charges. "The noise was indescribable on the surface and we could only imagine what it was like for those poor bastards below."

In 1981 I took my dad to see the Wolfgang Peterson movie *Das Boot*. The opening scene takes place in La Rochelle, France where we see the crew of the German U boat spending their last night before their next patrol drinking and carousing in a French nightclub. It's quite a funny scene and as I looked over at my dad, there were tears in his eyes and he looked at me and said, "We were doing the same thing on the other side of the ocean. They could be us."

HMCS Buctouche appeared in a feature-length Hollywood movie, *Corvette K225*, starring Randolph Scott. She was only filmed from her starboard side which carried the K225 number for the movie. Her port side carried her actual number K179 as she was still an active duty ship. I have seen the movie several times since first watching it many years ago with him.

I recall that dad would mostly reminisce about the good times he had with his messmates, the drinking and carousing, the cast of characters any Hollywood scriptwriter would die for, the camaraderie that only comes between men who share the experiences of front-line combat. Only rarely would he talk about the horror of war on the North Atlantic, and then in quiet reverent tones, sometimes drifting off in thought.

Dad passed away in 1998.