

For me, it all began more than 82 years ago in Winnipeg, Manitoba. When I was about four or five, my mother took me to a photographic studio where the picture of me in a suit and vest with a cane was taken. The earliest thing I can remember was when we lived in the Ruth Apartments, not far from the Assiniboine River. Down by the river bank was the “gas works” where coal was processed into manufactured gas for the kitchen stoves of the city and for industrial purposes. The residue was coke, used by many to heat their homes. I had always been fascinated by the huge gas storage tanks which I could see from our apartment. One day, when my mother wasn’t watching, I wandered down to the gas works to see these tanks, but I don’t recall ever getting there. My frantic Mother finally found me, and I didn’t even know that I was lost!

We moved to Fort Garry and I started school there in the General Steele School at 15 Chester Street, named after an early RCMP leader called Sam Steele when it was still called the Northwest Mounted Police. There was no kindergarten in those days. I remember my teacher, Miss Ablett. We used to say “Miss Ablett swallowed a tablet.”

My father was part-owner of a cut glass factory, where lines of girls sitting at wooden tubs cut patterns into crystal glass blanks with belt-driven sandstone wheels. But when the Depression hit, sales of cut glass plummeted, and Dad closed down the business. We still have some samples of his work.

In 1930 we moved to Montreal, quite a cultural shock for me, and at first lived for a few weeks on Gauthier Street in the East End with Mother’s parents, where of necessity we had to speak some French. Later on, we moved to Outremont in the northwest part of the city, which at that time was a mixture of English, French and lots of Jewish people. We lived in a small block of flats in a middle class area on Bloomfield Avenue. I went to an elementary school (Guy Drummond) from Grade III to Grade VII, and here I was given my first bicycle, although the school was not far away. Then on to Strathcona Academy for Grades VII and IX. This was a Protestant English speaking high school, although about half the students were Jewish. The Roman Catholics went to RC Schools. In wintertime it was about a 20-minute walk, sometimes in bitter cold. I was given my first strapping here, by Mr. Brennan, a strict disciplinarian, for talking in gym class. I remember once I had not done my homework in Algebra, and was required to stay after school and do it, presided over by my teacher Mr. Ernest Deathe (we called

him “Deathless Ernest” behind his back). As I sat in the empty classroom struggling with my Algebra, I said “Gee whiz, Mr. Deathe, isn’t there an easier way to do this?” He replied “John, there is no Royal Road to Algebra, now get on with it.” I did, and gradually got to like Algebra, and other Math subjects, which are basic tools in Engineering, although I didn’t realize it at the time. I joined the Wolf Cubs, and then the Boy Scouts, and went to Camp Tamaracouta, in the Laurentians in summer. Eventually I became a King’s Scout, the highest qualification in Scouting.

Dad’s office and showroom were on the second floor of a building on St. Catherine’s Street in downtown Montreal. Here were tables and shelves on which were samples of the glass and chinaware which he sold by the carload to department stores such as Eaton’s, Simpson’s and Ogilvies, and chain stores such as Woolworth’s, Kresge’s, Metropolitan Stores. He was called “Carload Mason” by his business associates, as he brought glassware into Canada by the freightcar load.

My father’s glassware importing business prospered, and as the focus of his business was in Toronto, in 1937 we moved there. Here I finished high school (Grade XIII) at Lawrence Park Collegiate Institute, a high school for students intending to go on to university. At this school I learned to play the trumpet. This cost my father \$50.00 second hand, and he was concerned that it might be a passing fancy. I played in the school orchestra, band and in a non-school dance band called “Al Ballantyne and his Top Hatters”. As it was wartime, there was also a cadet corps here, and I played bugle in the bugle band. I graduated from LPCI in June of 1942, but due to shortages of farm and industrial workers, if a student could land a job in these sectors, he could leave school early without writing final Senior Matriculation exams. I went to work on a farm near Bolton, ON for Mr. Tom Crickmore. I learned to harness and use horses, drive a tractor, milk cows, shovel manure, stook sheaves of grain, and many other features of farm life. This farm had no electricity and no indoor plumbing. It had a battery operated radio. It was very hard work, and the wages were miniscule. I left that job and started Mechanical Engineering at the University of Toronto in September of 1942. I had enjoyed taking things apart – AND putting them together, and I had made many models with my Meccano set, so Dad suggested that I take Mechanical Engineering. I had breezed through high school, but Engineering was a lot harder, and I didn’t apply myself sufficiently. I failed some mid-term exams and lost interest in University. The country was at war, and I wanted to join the forces before it was over. I first applied for the RCAF

because of Dad's background in the RFC, but they weren't taking any more, and I didn't want to join the Army, so there was the Navy, about which I knew nothing. I had Grade XIII in Ontario – equivalent to 1st year university in other provinces, and many new recruits with this qualification became officers.

In December I joined the RCNVR (Royal Canadian Navy Voluntary Reserve) as a Second Class Stoker and in early February was sent to Galt, ON (now Cambridge) to begin Engine Room Artificer (ERA) training. I was one of 45 people in Division #7. Numbers 5, 6 and 7 were there at the same time. We were billeted in private houses. Bill Mann and I shared a double bed in a small two bedroom bungalow with David Norwood (an Alderman of Galt) and his family. They had moved their 5 year old son into their bedroom to make room for us. This was typical of the support for the war effort put forward by the people of this town. It wasn't like the real Navy – no duty watches, every weekend off from Saturday noon. Much of our training took place in the Galt Collegiate and Technical School. The Navy had taken over the machine and fitting shops for this training program. Training continued here, and in other venues in Galt, in machine shop and fitting shop practice, welding, electricity and marine engineering until September, 1943, when we moved to Hamilton to Westdale Technical School to study Internal Combustion Engines. We were also billeted out here in private homes. I shared a bed with Walter Swerdlyk in a house owned by an elderly widow, Mrs. Mackenzie. This was about a half-hour walk from WTS. In December we were sent to Halifax to continue our machine and fitting shop, sheet metal shop, moulding shop, and marine engineering training. We made tools for future use, examples of which are on a board outside the workshop in our house. In Halifax we were accommodated (?) at first in an old WWI army barracks in HMCS Stadacona. In winter, the snow sifted through the single pane windows and the toilets froze. This was intolerable, and after several months we were moved to recently constructed D block which was much better, even too hot at times! D block was a temporary building, but it was still standing when I was XO of Stadacona in 1964.

Part of our training was at sea in a four-stacker lend-lease ex USN destroyer HMCS Niagara. She was one of 50 WWI destroyers acquired by Britain from the USA under Lend/Lease for naval and air bases in Argentina (NFLD), Bermuda and Trinidad. These old destroyers were not suited for the North Atlantic as they lacked sufficient heating, and were not very

seaworthy in rough weather. Our final exams and trade test were completed in July of 1944. Most of my classmates were drafted immediately to ships, but I was sent to Hochelaga II, a holding barracks across the river from Montreal, as part of the crew for "Frigate 29", wherever or whatever it was called. For almost three months we took courses in seamanship, anti-aircraft gunnery, fire-fighting, damage control, as well as marching and "yard-birding" (nail on the end of a stick to pick up garbage) to keep us occupied. Finally in September, 1944, I was drafted to HMCS Fort Erie, a frigate, commissioning in Quebec City. While we were outfitting there, HMCS Magog was towed in minus her stern, which had been demolished by a homing torpedo in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and HMCS Shawinigan was storing for her last voyage. She was sunk in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where we were bound on our way to Halifax. Great for moral in a green crew! In October of 1944 we sailed for Halifax in rough weather. Mal-de-mer affected many of this green crew. But this meant more work and watches for those of us who survived. My first duties were in the boiler room, turning on and off oil fuel sprayers, checking the air supply so as to not make smoke (too much air would produce white smoke, and too little air would create black smoke), checking boiler water level, cleaning and replacing sprayers, and general cleaning up, under the supervision of Stoker Petty Officer Joe Shorthouse. These ships had closed stokeholds, which you entered through an air lock. The stokehold was under pressure (up to 8" of water gauge) to provide better combustion and reduce the height of the funnel. There was little chance of escape if the ship was torpedoed. Later I was stationed in the Engine Room, oiling and feeling bottom and top ends of the reciprocating main engines, operating auxiliary machinery such as evaporators, cleaning up and making coffee for the ERA's. In the Engine Room were a Third Class ERA (Engine Room Artificer) and a Fourth Class ERA on the throttles of the engines, a Leading Stoker, and two Stokers.

In January we sailed for Bermuda for "work-ups" and the calm seas and warmer weather of that area. Near Bermuda we did WUPs (Work-Ups) with HMCS St. Catherines, and managed to tow her aground. She then spent several weeks in the floating drydock, which they didn't mind at all. Our captain, LCdr Ford, a former China Seas skipper, was relieved of his command, and we got a much nicer man in LCdr Piper. We then went back to the stormy North Atlantic for convoy and patrolling duties. In April, 1945, I was promoted to Petty Officer ERA 4/c, and moved from the squalor of the Stokers' Mess to the relative luxury of the ERA's Mess.

When word reached us on May 12 that the war in Europe was over we were at sea, and the order was given to “splice the main brace” which meant an extra tot of rum for all. At nightfall, navigation lights and upper deck lighting were switched on, for the first time since the war began. This was rather alarming, as there were still U-boats at sea which had not yet surrendered. We arrived in Halifax two days after the riots in which drunken sailors had looted liquor stores and vandalized much private property. I had volunteered to serve in the Pacific in the war against Japan, so was sent on a month’s leave. While at home, I received a message that I was to report on board HMCS Antigonish, being tropicalized in Pictou, Nova Scotia. I remember one day when all Petty Officers in the ship were piped to muster in the waist (midships). I guess there were about 20 of us, lined up in single file. Apparently a woman had come down to the ship with an RCMP constable, claiming to have been raped by a Petty Officer from the ship the night before. She and the constable plus the coxswain and the Officer-of-the-Day walked down the line looking at each one of us, and past me as I knew they would. Finally when they got to the end of the line, we were given the order “Off Caps”. She then walked back up the line and stopped in front of me. She said “That’s him.” My heart stopped and my knees shook, then I remembered and said to the Officer-of-the-Day, “Sir, thank God I was Duty Watch last night.” She was quickly led off the ship. This was the time I was most frightened in WWII.

The war in the Pacific was over in August of 1945 before we left Pictou. After that we made trips to Bermuda and St. John’s Newfoundland to de-garrison Canadian personnel from those places.

I was demobilized in Toronto on December 12th, 1945 and went on to study Mechanical Engineering at the University of Toronto. Classes began at Ajax, near Pickering east of Toronto, ON in January of 1946 in the former DIL (Defence Industries Limited) shell filling plant, now converted to classrooms and labs for the tremendous influx of would-be engineers discharged from the forces. There were many small buildings connected by unheated walkways to reduce the chance of one DIL building exploding and damaging others. The Engineering Department of U of T had done a tremendous job of converting these buildings to class rooms and labs. We lived in dormitories where the wartime workers have lived. I lived with Joe Collins, and I owe a lot to him, as I had forgotten much of my high school physics, chemistry, algebra, trigonometry and geometry. But I got through First Year

I and made honours in Second Year. We went from First Year to Second Year at Ajax with only a three week interval between. IN the summer between Second and Third Year, I worked as a machinist at Steep Rock Lake Iron Mines, near Atikokan, ON, a job which I got due to my Navy training and experience. Years 3 and 4 were spent on the main campus of U of T. In the summer between Third and Fourth years, I worked at the Wheel and Rim Company in Toronto, installing air brakes, power take-offs, reinforcing frames and dual axles in trucks to prepare them for the installation of dump bodies and cement mixers. We had to acquire 600 hours of practical and relevant experience before graduation.

It was said that Year 3 was intentionally tough (It was!), and virtually everyone passes Year 4. I lived at home at 287 St. Leonard's Avenue for Years 3 and 4. I graduated in 1949, and rejoined the Navy as an Acting Sub-Lieutenant (E).

When I was at university, I got involved in the summer time with a car-racing group as an unpaid announcer. The quartermile track was located on a farm just north of Toronto, owned by Harley Morden. When I left to join the RCN, I was presented with the little silver racing car, which resides in the bar.

In May of 1949, I re-enlisted in the RCN as an Acting Sub-Lieutenant (E), and after the Officers' Divisional Course in HMCS Stadacona, was posted to the Royal Naval Engineering College in Plymouth, England.

From September of 1950 to August of 1951, I served in the Korean War in HMS Kenya, a Colony class cruiser, and then was posted back to RNEC for Advanced Marine Engineering training. I was promoted to Lt (E) in July of 1951.

On return to Canada in September of 1952, I was posted to HMCS Quebec as an Engineering Watchkeeping Officer, and as a Divisional Officer.

In April of 1954, I was appointed as Engineer Officer to HMCS Buckingham (frigate) which was fitting out at Canadian Vickers Shipyard in Montreal. In 1955 we were detailed to take the Lt.Gov. of Nfld on his annual visit to the outports. As I could play the trumpet (and bugle), I borrowed a Stokers uniform and we lined up at the top of the brow (gangway) to receive him (In the pouring rain). As he came up the gangway,

the honour guard presented arms, and I blew the General Salute. He was escorted to the Captain's cabin by the Captain, and his two uniformed staff officers were escorted to the Wardroom for refreshment. They were startled when in came a Stoker who marched over to the bar and proceeded to help himself. "Oh yes," said the Executive Officer, Don Knox, "we run a really democratic ship here." Then we all laughed at their astonishment, until the situation was explained to them.

In November of 1955 I was posted back to Canadian Vickers to stand-by the building of the destroyer HMCS Ottawa, and became her first Engineer Officer when she commissioned in November of 1956. In July of 1957 I was promoted to LCdr (E). In this ship I qualified as a Clearance Diving Officer (Ships). When the ship was on a visit to New London, CT for the commissioning of the submarine HMCS Grilse, I passed the Bouyant Assent qualification in the USN Submarine School. This is a survival mode using only a life jacket from 50 ft. One must blow out during the assent, supervised by free divers.

In November of 1958 I was sent to Halifax Shipyards to stand by the building of HMCS Chaudiere, and became her first Engineer Officer on commissioning in November of 1959. In this ship I qualified for my Bridge Watchkeeping Certificate, and passed the Command Exams and Board to become Command Qualified, the first officer of the Engineering Specialization to do so.

In March of 1962, I was assigned to the staff of the Commander Fifth Squadron as Cadet Midshipmen Training Officer, set up the curriculum, and made the arrangements for their training that summer. I was posted to HMCS ST. Croix in this capacity and as a watchkeeping officer.

In June of 1962 I married Ritha, a Lieutenant (W) RCN.

In September of 1962 I was promoted to Commander and posted to the Naval Research Establishment in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

In July of 1964, I was appointed in Command of HMCS Algonquin, being the first officer of the Engineering Specialization to command a sea-going ship.

In May of 1965, I was appointed as Executive Officer of HMCS Stadacona, being the first Engineer to hold this post. I was acting Commanding Officer of STADACONA from July to September during the absence of the Captain on special duties elsewhere.

In October of 1965 I was posted to Naval Headquarters in Ottawa on the staff of the Director of Ship Design and Construction.

In September of 1967 I was promoted to Captain and appointed as the Director of Intelligence Production.

During my service at NDHQ, he studied part-time at Carleton University and in 1972 was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in Public Administration.

In August of 1972 I was posted to the Canadian Defence Liaison Staff in London, England as the Senior Maritime Liaison Officer.

In August of 1976 I was posted to the Canadian Embassy in Oslo, Norway as Naval, Military and Air Attache. I was also cross-accredited to Sweden and Denmark.

I retired in November 1978 after 34 years of service, and chose to reside in Victoria, where I worked for 12 years for the B.C. Government.

Ritha and I have three grown children, one of whom is a Mountie. We have six grandchidren. I am a member of the Naval Officers' Association of Vancouver Island, the Chiefs and Petty Officers Association, a Life Member of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of BC, the HMCS Uganda/Quebec Association, the ERA Apprentices Association, and the Canadian Legion. I am a trustee of the HMCS Sackville Foundation and a member of Friends of HMCS Haida. I am active in cyberspace, and Webmaster of several Web Sites. I swim and walk to keep fit.

In 2005, I went to visit a former high school friend, Les Wagar. We lived on the same street in Toronto, Greer Road. Les was bright at school and active in sports. He was a year ahead of me. In the spring of 2005, there was an article in Maclean's Magazine about him, living in Red Deer, who had landed at D-day without a scratch, although his companions were being mowed down on the beaches of Normandy. He was part of the liberation of Holland. I e-mailed Maclean's to see if I could get in touch with him stating

that I was an old high school chum. To my surprise and delight, the author of the article sent me his address and telephone number. When I called him, he remembered me, and even though he was quite deaf, but we managed to arrange that I would go to Red Deer after the ERA Apprentice's Reunion in Kelowna. He was going to Holland to celebrate the liberation of Holland, and went back for the 60th anniversary where he was mobbed. When I got there in September, we reminisced about high school days in Toronto. We each remembered things the other had forgotten. As it was wartime, we had both been in high school cadets. I remembered the time we had taken the front wheel off one of our bicycles, and put the forks on the other's rear axle to make a tandem, which proved difficult or impossible to ride.