

The Memory Project Interview with

Robert Shewan

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Interviewer: Daniel Pomerleau

Where were you born?

I beg your pardon?

Where were you born?

Eh? I'm a little bit deaf?

Where were you born?

Montreal.

Have your family always been in Canada?

No, no, my mother and father were born in Scotland.

OK. OK. When did they move?

Uh, they moved just before I was born and my mother died here of childbirth. And, uh, then I went back to Scotland and I started school there and then I came back here. My father had remarried then and then I was back and forth three times when I was a child.

Did you have both citizenships?

I beg your pardon?

Were you both Scotland and Canadian citizen?

No I'm a Canadian citizen. I was born here.

And what did your parents do as a job?

My father was a toolmaker and my mother I don't know because I never, never met her. But my step-mother had been a secretary. I can tell you that much. But in, she was from England no she was from Ireland she had also immigrated here and met my father here so ah and that's about as much as I know. I know a little about her family but that's

What did you do prior to enlist?

What? When?

Before you enlist in the Army what did you do?

I was in the Navy. But well I just finished I finished school not long. Oh yeah I was into the Ferry Command I was working there and my boss tried to stop me from joining the Navy actually and he could have had he wanted to badly enough. I

was there for... I don't know quite how long. But ah, we were actually putting aircraft out through Montreal going to Britain. That's what was happening from here.

[Ferry Command was a covert operation established to assist the war effort by flying newly assembled American air planes from Dorval/Montreal to Gander, Newfoundland (for refuelling) and on to Prestwick in Great Britain during the Second World War.]

And what did you hear about the war before you enlist? What did you know?

Just about the same as anybody with a radio, newspapers, and people of course. My father was a veteran from the First World War and I got some knowledge of what it was about.

And your father, since he knew what war was like was fine with your enlisting? He was fine that you enlist?

No. He said, "You're too young." Because what happened first of all there was a bunch of young guys and we had birth certificates from a church and I'd joined Air Force and I was on way to Lachine just about when he showed up. He'd found about somewhere and he was with the flag officer...only 16 at the time and so he said, "That's out."

Why did you want to enlist?

Well I was interested in flying to start with and when you're a kid you don't really understand what this is all about and it doesn't take long to find out of course.

Yeah. I guess so. What was life on a ship?

For me senseless. Not all of it but a lot of it. The Navy for me...I don't know where they got their ideas other than Nelson but what could have happened had they had an educated man on there, a teacher for instance, they wouldn't have painted the ship 25,000 times and chipped paint off it the same number. They could have had classes going a couple of hours every days and I could have come out of the Navy with a BA or something like that. So that part of the Navy for me I didn't particularly care for. But you're there and that's that.

Have you been on the same ship all war long?

No, I was on three ships.

And what kind of ships?

Well, the first one was a frigate, HMCS Meon, and the Kootenay and the last one was the Charlottetown. The Charlottetown was in refit when I joined it, and ah they were refitting the ship for the Pacific, so I didn't go anywhere with that, other than just being part of the crew onboard in the harbour. ...The other ships I was living on was mostly in the Bay of Biscay down in that neck of the woods before the invasion [6 June 1944] and after. When we come back to Canada I got drafted to the Kootenay, and we went back into the same area, up and down the English Channel and around that neck of the woods.

[HMCS Meon was a river class frigate, commissioned 7 Feb 1944. In April, as part of Escort Group EG-9 it participated in support operations for the Normandy invasion and hunted U-boats in English Channel. HMCS Kootenay—originally HMS Decoy a Royal Navy "D-class" destroyer, was converted and gifted to the Canadians on 15 June 1943. After serving as a river class destroyer in North Atlantic, the English Channel, and the Bay of Biscay, she was refitted (Oct 1944-Feb 1945) and in April 1945 assigned to the Western Approaches Command. After the German surrender in May 1945, Kootenay served as a troop transport in Canadian waters. The HMCS Charlottetown was in refit from mid-June 1945 to 28 February 1946.]

So basically, you were patrolling the area? What kind of missions did you do?

Well, ah. They called us at one point we were I guess on—what would you say—Convoy duty. But when we got into the Bay of Biscay and around there, they called a Striking Force. And that was up and down the French coast and into the rivers when we could get in there and things like that.

What is a difficult day in the Navy?

A what?

A difficult day?

A difficult day? When you got no sleep.

You were afraid of submarines?

I didn't sleep very well there, at all. Not at all. And aboard the ship it's.... I never adjusted to that part of it. And I'd go days without sleep sometimes. That's what I found hard.

And what kind of task did you do?

Well ah...

Except painting the ship?

Well that...that's... and then I was the carpenter's mate on the first one and then most of... but ah...you get a task alright. I was part of a gun crew. There were two main guns on the ship; the four inch guns, their main guns on the frigates. And I was part of one of their crews. It takes about—what is it—seven to run that thing. That was on that particular ship. And again, on the next ship, on the HMCS Kootenay I was part of a gun crew again. So...the only thing, the gun was a little bigger and had different type of ammunition and I don't know if they ever wrote that down. I actually got them to change their way of firing the gun.

How? You broke it?

Well...When you load a gun, they had three people. Two getting ammunition from ammunition racks or wherever, and they pass it to one who puts it into the magazine or whatever you want to call it, to be fired. But the way they did it they would pass it from here to here, and I looked at that and I said "We're wasting time here. Every time you try to get it into somebody's arm the ship's rolling, if something's happening, you're trying to put ammunition in their arms, it's a slow process. It slows it down." I said, "Okay, on our crew we do it a little differently if we can." So I got the guns Captain to agree and what-not. I said "We're going to take the ammunition not like this, we're going to get it this way, and put it into somebody's hands who's got them in the right position to put them into it." So we changed the speed of the gun by a considerable amount. They were even going to get the press aboard.

And it worked?

Oh sure. It made common sense. When you're trying to put something into somebody's hands from here and his hands are this way and the thing is about this long and weighs about 50 lbs you can't do that. It doesn't make much sense.

And what did the officer think about it?

They didn't know about it for a long time. And they were going to get the press aboard to see how fast we were firing this thing. But I don't know whatever happened but...

That's what you were saying earlier. If people that were educated were there the process would have been better. That's an example, isn't it?

Yeah. Well oh yeah. But we formed our own way of doing it. Not the way it was written in their book or whatever they... It worked.

And did that arrangement of new process, of new thinking, it was often? Or you were quite an exception?

Well in different things I... the service doesn't want you to think too much I don't think. They want you to obey orders as such whether they make sense to you or they don't. And I, I'm not that type of person. If I see something that's not making sense to me then if I have a means of changing it, I'll do it. And that's what took place.

And, between us, did you question the orders often?

Oh, you've got to obey certain orders. There's no doubt about it. But there're things that happened that I won't even talk about because... I've got a little thing in the back of my mind and I even thought about writing to Ottawa about it but that's done. It's over with.

War on sea was terrible. What were most afraid of? Planes? Submarines?

Well, I don't know if you can call it afraid. You don't see submarines very often—once in a blue moon. But, we'd been bombed a few times and things like that. The worst bombing was by the Americans. We were in the river in Brest and one of our ships was stuck out there with ASDIC which is sonar if you want to call it that. The Americans call it that. Had broken down so somebody had to go and get him whose sonar was working and our skipper wanted a medal badly, and he got it too, he said he would volunteer our ship to go and get this guy that was broken down. So we did. We went and got him. Got him out of there. And it's all part of the game.

What was the food like in boats?

In Britain...well the food we got from Britain was terrible and from Ireland. Both those places because it was always mutton, no beef and the only fish we got, if we picked up a school of fish on the ASDIC. We dropped one depth charge and would feed six ships.

So, so food it was tinned food? How... food was coming in cans? No fresh foods?

Oh cans. Didn't see very much canned food. There was a lot food but it left plenty to be desired. We had on the first ship I was on, we had a cook from Quebec City. He made best pea soup you ever tasted but he couldn't cook anything else. But at least when he knew what he was cooking we knew we were going to get something we could eat.

You said you never slept well. How did you adjust to sea life? I mean were you seasick sometime?

Never. A five dollar bet.

Really? At the beginning? And you won? Wow.

That. It's a terrible thing. It can be. And there again somebody can be chronic with it. Chronic seasickness. And it's just a pity to watch them. They go and sit by the funnel and sit there and don't move... can't do anything...they can't do anything at all. Really, if you've got the chronic seasickness. But what the Navy does, if you started off on a frigate and you were sea sick well they'd draft you to maybe a mine sweeper. You might not be sick on that ship. And if you're still sick, they'd draft you to a corvette. I mean you could be dying about the thing and they'd be drafting you from ship to ship to see if they got the right ship you could sail on.

Because some were a lot more stable I guess.

Oh yeah. Well, oh, no. I mean the size of the ships we had...the biggest ship, the destroyer, was big. I mean we had a couple of carriers but they were very limited in number of people you have on them so...the ships that you had at sea all the time they were corvettes, the frigates, the destroyers. They were always at sea. Like I said, the guys that were chronic seasick it was a shame to watch it. It's not something that should happen to anybody.

And... it was kind of a...people were often seasick? There were a lot of people who were seasick?

No. Most people got over it after maybe a couple of days, couple of weeks. Could be a day. Could be anything. But if they were, they mostly got over it.

I guess if you were still seasick after a couple of months, you would be better in the infantry, right?

Well finally, they would put you on different ships and if you were still seasick, and if you were lucky enough, they would put you ashore. Get some shore job. And that was it.

And did you make friends during those times on boats?

Well sure. Everybody does. People are people. Just give 'em a chance and sooner or later somebody is going to be friendly with somebody else.

And did you see people from other services? I mean from the air or army?

Not as such. We weren't associated with the men in their capacity. No.

And did you ever met civilians?

Civilians? Well you meet them all the time actually. When I was overseas met I met, in fact I met some of my relatives over there. My aunt and so on that I'd been brought up partly with and... But again she was considered in the upper class in some case. I don't know why. She was a lawyer for the commercial bank of Scotland and this would have put.... If I had been her son for instance they have said you're going to officer's training school. Because of why? Because your social standing is higher. And I could never figure these kinds of things out. But that part of the service.

What did you think about the enemy, the Germans?

Well. You don't really... You don't think about them as much as their system. I didn't anyhow. If you can get a young guy, even myself, because I had a Communist aboard the ship trying to convince me to be a Communist. I said "Get lost. I'm not interested in that." But if you've got a kid young enough you can teach him anything and he'll grow up thinking it's the right thing, unfortunately.

What's the longest time you've been in a mission?

Mmmm... We were at sea, I think we were out three months or something like that. Because one of our ships got hit with a glider bomb and we'd been at sea about a month. And we were the ship that brought it in. Didn't sink it but their engine room got wrecked and guys got killed of course. We towed it into Plymouth from somewhere down around Brest into Plymouth and into harbour. When we got in they had an ammunition barge waiting for us, a tanker, a small tanker. Filled us up with oil, threw some ammunition aboard and back to sea again so we never got nobody got to shore on that so it ended up that we were about three months. And you go a little stir wacky.

[The ship was the HMCS Matane hit 20 July 1944 by a German glider bomb off Brest and towed, badly damaged, to Plymouth by HMCS Meon.]

What did you miss the most during those time?

What do you miss the most? Freedom. Freedom. Doing what you want to do when you want to do it? Not when somebody else is saying, "Do this" and you look at it a while like that and you say "What do want me to do with it." And say "Paint it". "It's just been painted." Things like this. It's senseless things. I guess if you're a senseless person it's fine.

But you weren't?

No. I like to think about things a little bit.

Didn't receive parcels, letters?

Not really. There wasn't much that I wanted my parents to send. I would send things back there. I'd some money now and then and things but we had all sorts of things like that aboard the ship. You know sweaters and things that people had sent. And of course the biggest thing then, everybody smoked.

Everybody?

Smoked. It was a way of life actually.

I guess it was freezing out there?

That's why I kidded them. I said "I guess the Indians got you at last." They'd say "What?" I said "They got you at last." "What do you mean?" I said "You're smoking. They didn't have to have a war with you they could have sat back and watched you die."

So you smoked?

I smoked.

You still smoke?

No. Not now. 30 years. I quit.

And how was the weather out there?

The weather? It depends where you are. Down in Bay of Biscay in the summer it's wonderful it's like a cruise as long as no one's trying to bomb you or do anything or shell you or anything like that, it's nice. The weather's nice although you can't go swimming. But down in that neck of the woods the weather can be very nice but when the winter comes around you get the storms and you get the other thing but the North Atlantic is probably... that's about as bad as it gets in a lot of ways. The cold, the ice...

Were people sick? Were people sick sometimes?

Some. Well, usually they'd been on a ship for a while by then and were accustomed to the rolling around and all this. We lost a ship off of Halifax in a Hurricane and never knew where it went; never seen it again, just disappeared.

Not yet, until today? We still don't know what happened?

Well the storm was on pretty good. And were traveling let's say in that direction about 24 knots. That about 27 miles an hour and we were going 2 miles an hour trying to stay into the storm so it wouldn't wash it around as it wanted. It can get pretty severe. Only been in one hurricane and it's the only one I want to be in.

When your ship came back to port what did you do?

Back to port? Well often when you come in, like that three month trip, we had to have our boilers cleaned. Half the ships company went on leave to Scotland and other half stay on the ship...somebody's got to be there. So things like this and then if it was a longer job then other half of the ship would go and the guys that had already been on leave it was their turn to look after the ship while it was in harbour.

Those times, I guess you slept better?

Then you could sleep because you were sleeping at night. Most of the time. You sat watches ... but not the same thing. Because the way the ship is set up you should be standing 4 hours of watch on the lookout and 8 hours off but it depends on where you are and sometimes it was 2 and 2 or things like this. They break them down because they had to try to get you some sleep. But anyway it's one of those things. And I know because I passed out twice, once when I was steering the ship but I knew I was going and they've got a tube that goes up to the bridge—we were an area that where the wheel and the compass and I knew I was going to pass out—and I called up. The Captain was there and they said "Try to hang on and we'll get someone there as soon as I can."

And you passed out?

And when they got there I was on my knees with my hands around the post and through the wheel to try to keep this thing going that way not this way, that way. 'Cause that's where the rest of our group was—on either side. I didn't want to run into anybody either.

Did you know at that time what was happening during the war or just kept focussing on your tasks? Did you knew anything else about the war. When you were on mission?

Well our mission that time, we were trying to... this would probably be after the Invasion started. Our deal was to keep the submarine bases, keep them in there. Don't let them out and don't let the guys back in that were already out because we didn't want them back up there where the supplies were coming in and all this stuff. That was a huge job if ever there was one. They couldn't have a bunch of submarines running around torpedoing everything. It would have been bad. Really. Because they had same as us they had motor torpedo boats and they did the same kind of thing. But by that time though we had more of everything than they did.

[This was aboard the Kootenay which returned to the English Channel in April 1945 and was assigned to the Western Approaches Command where until the end of the war she assisted in protecting against last-gasp efforts by the Kriegsmarine to interfere with Allied supply lines to the Continent. After the German surrender in May 1945, Kootenay served as a troop transport in Canadian waters.]

So you felt good about the outcome of the war?

Getting near the end it was to keep them from participating actually as much as possible. Their best weapons at that time I guess would have been maybe been the JDAU88s with glider bombs, they'd fly a bomb down along a radio beam and if you happen to be in their way it was goodbye. But we had means to handle that too. When we lost one of our, we didn't lose the ship, we got them back to harbour. When we got into that and were back and they came back again to do the same thing or so they thought and I don't know if it was British or Canadian but they were flying mosquito bombers and they could use them as fighter planes. So when they arrived, when the Germans arrived, then they said good-bye to the Germans.

That must have felt good. You were happy to see them?

Yes

Did you make any prisoners?

No. The only ones we ever picked up were dead.

Oh! And you still picked them up?

Yes because we didn't know at first whether they were or not. They were floating. And, when you do... they were kids just like we were.

Back then, how did you spend your small leisure time?

I took a couple of courses aboard ship. Because I couldn't sit down and play cards for two days. Some guys could do it but I'm just not that type of person. So that was that.

And those courses helped you after the war? Financially?

Took a drafting course on one of them. I went to school after the war. Didn't graduate though. No. I continued the course that I was taking. [It] wasn't complicated there but you get into the other parts of it you've got to have mathematics. You've got to have various other things but then I was about to get into that part and I took a number of courses after that. Anyway, that started and ended my working life I guess.

When war was over what did you want to do first?

When I got out? The first thing I think anybody does, you have a party. And after that some people never got off the party but there's a limit to what you're going to do and I don't think anybody would have money to go like some guys were going.

So you came back to Canada and found a job?

No. I went to school and then I found a job.

Yeah, cause you were still very young?

Yeah I was 21 I guess, 20-21.

Did you marry then?

Yeah I got married. That was one of my big mistakes of life but I've got children from that marriage and we're still friends and I've got grandchildren from that. But that went down the drain and it's just as well that it did and wherever she is I don't know and it doesn't matter.

I forgot to ask. When war was over, where were you? What part of the world?

Montreal. I was aboard a ship that was getting refitted.

Oh, so you were already in Montreal?

The ship was getting refitted for the Pacific. We had what you call a skeleton crew. And we were aboard it for the last three-four months or whatever I was in. We were there but they still wanted to do the same things. The people that run the thing still wanted to do the same idiotic things. We're going to knock paint off of here and tomorrow we'll paint it again. I could never get it through there 'cause I'm going to take that paint off and tomorrow I'll paint it.

After the war what was, how was civilian life?

It was... I don't know it was kind of hard to accept in some ways because everything seemed so slow and no sweat. Nobody's trying to knock you off, nobody's trying to shoot you, nobody's trying to kill you. It's just a different style. It

doesn't take very long for the average person I don't think to get used to that. I'm quite sure, I haven't talked to everybody, but people settled in eventually. I can imagine it must have been hard for governments as well because you know you've got a bunch of guys into your civilization that's never been brought up to it where you would be learning what's going on moreso and interested in news and this that and the other and these guys, a big percentage, were interested in a party. Initially. It took a little bit for people to get over some of this stuff. Anyway we managed to survive I guess somehow.

Well, I guess so. And did you keep in touch with those people you met during war?

Not very many. That's why I belong to the Legion of course and all the guys, not now, but at one time, they were ex-service guys. Again, you meet a lot of people in the Legion if you spent all your time there that their whole idea is something like a military thing, that's not my idea of living.

OK. So you're not going there often. You're staying far from the Legion?

No. No, no. I have friends there. The fellows I'm with today, one of them, his brother and I were best friends and he got killed at Dieppe. And he was too young and he went into the Merchant Navy. But that's where I knew him from.

Thinking about it today was being in the Navy a luck or a bad luck?

Bad luck? I was lucky I am here. The bad luck is at the bottom.

Hmmm. Well said. If it had to happen again, would you do it again?

Not in the Navy. Not in the Navy. I'd be. Well, see when I was 16 like I said I joined the air force and I think I would have been happier there because I was with the Ferry Command before and they were sending aircraft overseas and so on and I've always been interested in airplanes. So I think if it had to be, I would get into something like that moreso. But definitely.... and again it's hard to say. I don't know what they're doing in the Navy nowadays but I'd certainly find out beforehand... I think people start to act like what they're doing and I could never do that. Just couldn't do it.

I have one last question. What would you like people to know from WW2? What is the one thing people should know about WW2?

That it's not fun. A war is not fun. And when it happens it affects not just yourself; your family's involved, and everything else. And that's why I had very few objections about this country but people that live in it and I don't care what part whether it's this part, or the West Coast or what, but they're very fortunate compared to some places, compared to some countries. Yeah. And the opportunities are here. Nobody's coming up to your door at night or anything like this. And we make too much of a language. There's no reason. Look at Switzerland. A little country like that they speak four languages. That's because they start them when they're not big. They don't start them when they're this big and then try to say, "Oh this is how it happens." You know half of the history we have here is a lot of bullshit. Literally. You know how when they say on the Plains of Abraham. They don't say there were only maybe 10,000 people in this country. The British sent a Navy up the river with that many people in it. You know that doesn't... there's no balance there.

Alright Mr Shewan, thank you.

Have I talked myself out?