

## **Joseph Austin Valdron (1919-2015)**

### **Second World War Memoirs**

I joined the Naval Reserve on July 21, 1940 as an ordinary Seaman after being released from hospital for a hernia operation. This was in Halifax, NS to where we had to hitchhike. On facing the regime of acceptance to which the recruiting officers (Naval Medical Officers) had the final say on the physical and mental attributes of the potential applicants, I was finally accepted. Debate ensued among the learned as to whether I would be ready for the arduous regimentation of basic training. Finally agreement was reached as to my potential. Subsequently I was registered and enrolled in the RCNVR (Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve).

I soon showed a preference for the electrical field with which I had tended to incline towards as a result of earlier interest in experiments and books pertaining to the field. I pursued this field at every opportunity, which resulted in my promotion to Petty Officer rating.

Six months later, just before Christmas, I was drafted aboard HMCS St. Clair, which was a World War I vintage destroyer. The very next day we were detailed with five "sister" ships to proceed overseas to cover the last leg of convoy duty in the North Atlantic. We had a most terrifying trip for which of the five identical ships left Halifax, only two actually reached the U.K. at the time. The other ships had to return to Newfoundland and Halifax for refit as a result of damage by the ferocious storms in the Atlantic.

After many days at sea, which seemed an eternity in my inexperienced mind, we finally docked at Greenock, Scotland. After a period of time to repair the damages to our ship, we were assigned our duties in the North Atlantic convoy which covered the Eastern half of the Atlantic Ocean, along the Norwegian coast (on what was generally known as the Murmansk Run), and on some occasions down to the Bay of Biscay off Spain, when escorting troop ships to the Mediterranean area of conflict.

Most, if not each one, of our excursions were fraught with life threatening experiences.

There were the ever present mountainous seas, raging storms and the constant threat of submarines, commonly called U-boats and floating mines, especially along the Norwegian coast. Some of these mines we would use for target practice, shooting them with rifles from our ship. We managed to blow a few up which perhaps saved some other ship from disintegration. There were also occasions when ice built up so much on the ship and rigging that there was danger of capsizing. We had to chop ice continuously at times, particularly in northern waters.

So having set the broad stage or scene, I shall proceed to the focal point of my most memorable, life threatening event.

We were docked at Greenock, Scotland, not far from Glasgow where most of servicemen headed when they had free time. On this particular evening in question, I was standing in line with a lovely, tall, Scottish brunette waiting to enter a theatre. I chanced to overhear two elderly Scots talking just in front of us. One said to the other: "Did you hear that Jack, the invincible Hood, sunk with one shot to her magazine from the German battleship Bismarck. It is feared there were no survivors" (for those readers/listeners not acquainted with Naval history or naval terminology, the "Hood" was the first in line of the British battleship fleet and was their pride and joy and symbol of British Naval supremacy at the time. The "magazine" is an area within the bowels of the ship, generally armor protected, where all the ship's ammunition, shell, gunpowder, etc. were kept.).

Hearing this news, I remarked to my date, "well we are in for it now, for sure". We managed to enter the theatre, grab our seats and shortly thereafter an announcement came over the theatre loudspeaker instructing all navy personnel to return to their ships immediately. I made my way back to the St. Clair and without any other official news, we proceeded to set sail at about 0400 hours the following morning. Being a mere Petty Officer in charge of electrical aspects and apparatus of the ship, I did not have the faintest idea of where we were heading for what specific purpose. However I was positive it had everything to do with the Bismarck-Hood episode.

We sailed for hours and days and I lost track of time. Oddly I cannot recall other ships being with us or nearby. However the weather was so foul it would have been difficult to

discern an outline of a ship at any safe distance, but presumably we were not alone. I believe we were escorted to the great British battleship HMS "Rodney". So it was that one morning after some clearing in the weather, we came upon a sky full of pockmarks which we recognized as puffs of anti-aircraft fire. It wasn't too long before we were sending up our own "puffs" as we became a dedicated target for German bombers. From then on all we could do was try and dodge the bombs as they kept raining down on us with unnerving regularity. It began around 0800 hours and continued throughout the day until about 1700 hours. During that time there were a total of 32 bombs dropped directly at our ship. I counted 7 at one time that fell directly in our wake by two German bombers (the "wake" in naval lingo is the foam or aerated water and debris churned up by the passage of the ship through the water).

I recall a few of the German bombers trying the dive-bombing technique and strafing our ship's deck with machine gun fire as they dove. At this particular moment with some youthful innocence, but likely more stupidity (I realized later), I thought it would be a good opportunity to try out my new folding Kodak camera which I had bought in Plymouth, England some months earlier and for which on returning to the camera store for supplies, found the store and all the street demolished by enemy bombing. Picture taking was a bit of taboo in the service so I had to learn about photo developing and subsequent in clandestine reproductions in the ship's sick-bay where I set up shop, so to speak. In any event on final development of the shot, I could not find the plane. Probably I was shaking too much and the plane was diving too fast.

The German planes would usually drop the bombs in patterns of three and occasionally one plane would cross over our ship in one direction while another would cross over in the opposite direction. Once I recall seeing one bomb falling on one side of the ship and another bomb about equal distance off the other side of the ship. I've often wondered what happened to bomb no. 3, but thankfully it didn't show up on our decks.

In all the bombing forays, we of course were peppering the enemy planes with every gun we had on the ship. I recall seeing one bomber trailing off in the distance, trailing smoke and gradually losing altitude. Whether we were credited with the downed plane I have no direct knowledge. We nearly got one of our own too! It happened at the end of the day and was the finale. We could see these two planes coming over the horizon,

one behind the other, heading for our ship and then crossing directly over our mid-ship at a fairly low elevation. They were still one behind the other and you can be assured we gave both a very hot reception. We found it a bit odd that no bombs were dropped this time. Both planes continued on in the distance circling around until we noticed a big puff of smoke from the leading plane, which then went down. The rear plane came back toward our ship and as we were preparing to blast it out of the sky, we got some signalling from the plane to tell us it was one of our own. Naturally there was one huge spontaneous howl of relief.

With some further reflection, I recall that at some time during all the fuss aforementioned or very shortly after the "final scene", we came upon many bodies floating around in the water covering a fairly large area. Many visibly beyond help, others with some apparent life still. We were operating in a swell of about six or more feet and it proved difficult to manoeuvre.

the ship to pick up survivors without chewing up some bodies with our ship's propellers. We also could not, I presume, lower smaller boats to allow for more intimate action, since the threat of bombers and subsequently German U-boats was all too real. We would be sitting ducks. So scramble nets were dropped over the sides and our ship would manoeuvre to the best of the Captain's ability, which was tops in my estimation. For without him "at the helm", I doubt I would be writing about this. "Davy Jones Locker" has no writing facilities nor postal service as I understand. One other arrangement in order to pick up survivors which I believe of my own volition, was dropping a large hawser (thick rope) over the bow of the ship where I climbed down hand over hand together with a smaller line to attach to survivors who could then be pulled along the side of the ship to the scramble net where the deck was much lower in the water and more easily accessed. This I did for a period of time until someone climbed down on top of me and my hands began to get numb from the freezing water. I was also a bit short of breath because as the ship went up and down in the sea swells, I also went up and down and was completely submerged with each "dip". I could see many bodies floating by, some fairly upright in their life jackets, others face down - assumed dead. One particular body caught my attention for a relatively long period of time. It was an officer, face down, arms spread apart. The magnifying power of the water almost made it appear that he had gold braid from his wrists to his elbow. I could do nothing for him

and as I was in danger of becoming a casualty myself, urged my “sitter” above me to get back up the rope and I hastily followed.

One other heroic incident is vivid for me. After I returned to deck, I went to the scramble nets to assist as I could. Suddenly we could see one survivor about 150 feet or more waving and calling out saying, “Good-bye boys, I’m going - I can’t hold on any longer”. We kept urging him to greater effort, but he repeated his goodbye. One young seaman in our crew, who apparently was a very good swimmer, yelled out “Hold on, I’m coming for you”! He tied a light line around himself and swam to the drowning sailor and both were then pulled back to the boat with the light line. Never was a sailor so grateful as this one!

In any event we managed to pick up 35 survivors from the British destroyer “Mashona” which had been struck by one of the enemy bombs. Not all the survivors “survived” unfortunately and we had some burials at sea.

It’s rather odd, but from this time on, there’s a large gap in my recollections. For instance, I don’t recall what we did with the survivors, whether we transferred them to some other British warship, or whether we brought them to port and if so, which port.

My next major recollection is the nightmare of a trip when we returned back to Canada. The weather was so severe we could not enter our mess (dining area), nor our sleeping quarters and had to find intermittent rest on top of boilers.

Around December 1943 our ship was ordered to St. Margaret’s Bay, near Halifax, N.S. to serve as a depot ship for Royal Navy submarines used in anti-submarine training. By May of 1944 the St. Clair was put in for repairs at the Halifax navy shipyards, remaining there until August 1944. It was around this time period I was transferred to the anti-submarine detection unit where I proceeded to begin upgrading my training and skills with the newest sub detection equipment that was in the process of being deployed by the Canadian navy. It was during this training period when I was stationed one summer with a crew-mate in Lunenburg, N.S. where during our off duty hours we enjoyed this lovely seaside village. As fate would have it, one day we found an abandoned, derelict fishing dory half sunk near the shore. We decided to patch it up in our spare time and

convert it to a harbor sailboat. Our landlady was kind enough to sew some sails for us and after a fair amount of repair we enjoyed many a spare hour sailing around the harbour and larger bay. By September 1944, the St. Clair had been reduced to a fire fighting and damage control training hulk. About a year later I finished my naval service being officially demobilized on August 21, 1945 at the end of the war. My final naval rank was A/S.A. 3/C (Anti-Submarine Artificer) stationed at HMCS Captor II (new barracks) located at Saint John, NB harbour (Reeds Point).

Joseph Austin Valdrón