

Ross Alfred Somerville
Memories of my time in the navy
Written in 1995

I joined the RCNVR, or at least I should say that I volunteered on January 23/41 (Ross' birthday)

They wouldn't sign me up right away so I went down to the Armoury on James North, and signed up with the 11th Field Battery in the Army. I was sworn in sometime later and was about to leave for Petawawa on the week end. A telegram came to our house saying I should report to HMCS Star on Stewart Street. I told them I was going away with the Army, and they said forget the Army you are now in the Navy.

I was sent to Halifax to the Signal School, we were then transferred to St. Hyacinthe in Quebec where the Navy established a new signal school. The one in Halifax was small and overcrowded - we slept in bunks under a Grand stand. It was indoors but not comfortable. (As an aside, Ross's brother told me that Ross and another recruit were caught sleeping in a field out behind the barracks. They were brought before the commander and they told him that they had decided to do that because the barracks were infested with bed bugs. Ross was quite worried that he would be severely disciplined but later that day the barracks were completely emptied out and fumigated. He was amazed with this result.)

We had leave from St. Hyacinthe (2 days) and painted Montreal red. I passed out as an "ordinary coder" and I always thought I was extraordinary!

We were sent back to Halifax (nicknamed "Slackers") and after a lot of bullshit marching, rifle drill, parade ground training I was drafted to a Bangor class minesweeper HMCS Quinte.

Quinte had just come around through the Panama from the West Coast where she was built. We went to Bermuda for working-up procedures (WUP). This included gunnery, signals, seamanship, away seaboat, man overboard, etc. etc. We used to take the whaler and go to a small island in the harbour for picnics and swimming. Clear blue water and white white sand. This of course was after all the training.

Quinte was assigned to convoy Halifax to Newfoundland and Sydney N.S. to South of Iceland - where other escorts would take over for transatlantic. Most of the Quinte crew were from Winnipeg West.

We were taking a convoy to Newfoundland in November '42 when we encounter a horrific storm. The convoy was scattered, and we were "hove" to for 2 or 3 days. The waves were coming over the bows like Niagara Falls, we lost the motorboat, Carley floats, sweep buoys, everything that was lashed down was gone. The navigator couldn't take a position, no stars, etc. He reckoned that a turn to port would take us into St. John's, instead we ran aground on a huge bloody rock, punching several holes in the bottom, flooding some compartments below. We put out an SOS and a couple of Fairmiles came out from Sydney. We were at St. Peters which is the entrance to the canal in Cape Breton (some 500 miles from our supposed position). The Captain ordered the Fairmiles alongside and lashed one one each side, when the tide came in we floated free of the rock (reef) and the Fairmiles drove us up on the beach. We were in St. Peters for maybe a month, could be more.

The signal officer and I burned the code books in a 45 gallon drum. The crew was billeted with private families in their homes. The Officers and a few of the Communications department including me were in the Radio Hotel, St. Peters. We really had a great time there because the people organized dances and parties. You couldn't buy booze there, but if you got a note from the local Doctor you could buy a bottle. There was a line up every day at the one doctor, with every one of us there claiming we had a cold. When this holiday was over and we returned to Halifax, we all put in for survivors leave (ha, ha, of course we didn't get it)

The Quinte was raised sometime in '43, repaired and back in service at Cornwallis as a training ship in '44. (My brother Bill Somerville trained as a stoker on her.) We lost the Engineering officer, I think he drowned when he fell off the scramble nets (probably loaded) while we were aground on the shore.

When the holiday was over, (I don't know what happened to the Navigating Officer, but we heard rumours of a Court Martial) I was drafted to the Corvette HMCS Morden shortly after, and we became part of an escort group convoying ships at a point off Newfoundland to the UK. Our home ports were St. John's and Londonderry Ireland.

It was always a most beautiful sight on arrival at Loch Foyle and then the trip up the River Foyle to Londonderry. While we waited for a pilot to guide us up the river, numerous boats would come out from Strabane (I think) we called them bum boats. They would trade stuff with us, anything from liquor to linen. We would trade butter, jam, socks and scarves that some poor old lady knitted for us and received in care packages from home. Some guys even traded their blankets (which were good quality). While we were on day leave in Londonderry you could cross the border into Free Ireland but you had to hide your hat in the bushes (then you were not in uniform - what a crock). I sent a lace table cloth home as a present to my Mom, and in later years my Mom told me it wasn't really Irish linen, it was one she could have bought in Canada and one third of the price. We had a favourite bar in Derry, I probably couldn't pick it out now, but the owner used to pull a special bottle out for us when we arrived. The locals were very kind to us, many of us were invited back for dinner, etc. One of the girls' father took me out golfing, which I didn't know the first thing about. The course was very rough, sheep grazing all over the place, along with the pile of shit they left behind. The sheep were very adept at getting out of the way of golf balls, I think they had radar.

Brother Bill (William Robert Somerville, HMCS Grue, V78432 Stoker 1st class) sent me a package from home one time, it was my birthday, inside was a huge loaf of bread with a 40 oz bottle of Rye inside the hollowed-out centre. We had a party on Rum before we went ashore in St. John's and then took the Rye with us. I don't really have much recollection of what happened, but I ended up in a cell with water running down the wall into a trough cut in the cement floor with one trough running out the cell door to a drain. Needless to say I sobered up in a hurry, and tried to sleep on a hard straw mattress on a steel cot hanging from the wall. The next morning I ended up in court and the Judge asked if I could be identified. Some old woman stood up and said "there's the sailor, the one with the beard, he broke my door down". The Judge rapped his gavel and said "Guilty - \$10 fine". The First Lieutenant of the Morden paid the \$10 then took me back to the ship. We sailed the next day, and the Captain confined me to ship for 10 days.

I was the Ship's Writer which paid an extra 10 cents a day. I typed all the reports and in a lot of cases composed the contents of the dispatch for the Captain. (However that was not known to anyone but the Captain and me).

Once during a convoy, we came upon a sub on the surface, and he didn't see us. We were so close that the C.O. decided to ram. He ordered "Full Ahead" - the telegraph in the engine room stuck in Full Astern. At this moment I was at my Action Station in the chart room and was opening one of the windows, it operated by use of a leather strap (when you pulled it came up and closed) I had unhooked the leather strap - and when the ship shuddered, my finger went down between the window and the opening - trapping it there. Of course no one was going to help me when we were ramming a sub, so I had to wait. The sub dived, we dropped charges - thought we got it - but not confirmed. My finger was finally extracted, I lost the nail on my middle finger right hand, had ridges as each nail grew until about 10 years ago.

Morden was the ship that I gained the most sea experience and therefore the one I relate to most.

The Captain was a Lieutenant RCNR, which means he had sea/lake-going experience, the Officers were all RCNVR. He was an excellent seaman, I think he probably imbibed quite a lot, but this was in exasperation I think because of the Officers and us. Once when we were at the entrance to the Foyle River waiting for a pilot (the pilots took the senior ships first - so there could be hours of waiting) he decided he would take the ship up himself. The river of course had a few twists and bends plus sandbars, etc. Well we managed to go aground on one of these bars, but he quickly ordered full astern, and after some wiggling we were free.

The crew of the Morden were a good bunch, and it doesn't matter who you talk to, everyone said the same about their ship. I think it was because we were so close together at work and in

the Mess. Corvettes were excellent sea boats, but they were very wet and miserable in rough weather. The waves would break over the bow and manage to find their way in the Mess-decks below because of the open fo'c'sle. There would be a couple of inches of water sloshing back and forth with clothing, food, vomit - you name it - mixed in with it.

Eating was a real thriller because you had to get by the open deck portion to get to the galley - sometimes you lost the whole thing and had to go back for seconds. I was very fortunate that I was only seasick once, on my first trip out with Quinte, after that I was not sick again. Some of the poor buggers were sick all the time, every trip. In some cases people were drafted ashore as chronic. When the weather was good, we all used to joke about our ocean "cruise".

As a Coder, my job was to decode all messages received by Morse usually in groups of letters. There was a new code book for each month, so when the message was received I had to take the list of number-letters, look it up in the code book for the month and transpose to words, etc. The Telegraphers (Receivers) always screwed up some of the numbers and I had to look at several meanings to get it right. I would always tell the Captain, (because I delivered them to him) whenever I was guessing (my guesses were good tho).

I was also the Mailman - I was the first one ashore when we landed to go to the Mail Office to pick up the ship's mail. Then I would go with the Signal Officer and pick up new code/cypher books. I was also the Ship's Writer and typed and wrote all the orders, dispatches, etc.

As the Ship's Writer there was a little cubicle about 3 ft wide by 5 ft deep with a typing desk. Filing cabinets, etc. It was located next to the Wardroom (Officer's Mess). There was a gangway that led to our Mess thru a dogged hatchway. I used to use this gangway to get to the little office from our Mess. The Officers had to buy their own beer and booze, and because of very little storage space they stored their cases of beer piled up in the gangway. Each time I went by I would lift a couple of bottles of Whitbread's Light Brown Ale on the way. It wasn't cold but it was so good.

On layovers (which were few) we could take a week leave, and we would go to London. I can remember air raids with burning, falling buildings. Fire fighters, trucks etc. trying to clear the debris and put out fires. I was walking a girl home from a dance at Covent Gardens (revolving stage) and air raid was in progress, she wanted to go right into the middle of it, we parted company and I slept in the Underground where it was safe.

Another nite, my buddy and I had a room at a hostel (50 cents per nite) - we were late going to bed after visiting a "few" pubs. The matron of the hostel came up some time during the nite, we could hear her trying to wake everybody up to go to the bomb shelter close by, but we went back to sleep. When we woke in the morning the window was broken, the mirror in the dresser was smashed and there were pieces of stone/cement on our bed. At breakfast (it went with the room) the matron asked us "Did you sleep well?" - after 2 to 3 times in London, I went to Bangor, a seaside resort on the Irish coast. It was beautiful, quiet, restful, the ocean came right up to the road in front of all the shops. Before I left there was a slight storm - the waves were breaking on the wall, spraying water up over the stores, it was a real treat. I went to the U.S. Hostel in Bangor for breakfast one day. They had the biggest eggs I ever saw. When I asked about them, I was informed they were goose eggs.

Morden was considered the champion rescue ship at one time having picked up hundreds of survivors from torpedoed merchant ships. I can remember coming across three whalers (lifeboats) from a Norwegian ship, and when we offered them a lift they refused. They asked how far they were from land (400-500 miles). We gave them some food and water and they sailed away. They were under sail when we first spotted them and on the right course also.

When I was off duty one day I was in the wheelhouse, and after watching the Quartermaster (Helmsman) for a while I asked him if I could take over - sure he says, so I took the wheel. You had to repeat the orders given from the bridge - ex. "Port 5" - answer "Port 5 on Sir, steering/bearing so and so". After about 1/2 hour the Captain hollered down the voice pipe "Who's at helm?" Answer "Somerville Sir" - there was a pause and then he said "take a look astern" - I looked out the back and the wake behind us looked like a big snake. I guess I was overcorrecting on bearings to steer.

When the ship became iced up I always went out with the seamen to chip ice even tho it was their job. When off duty of course.

One of the exciting trips we made was to the Med - the first sight of the Rock was very impressive, and inside the harbour were the big ships - the Duke of York, King George V, carriers, cruisers, destroyers, etc. etc.

Morden was with the convoy that was attacked by 20-30 subs using acoustic torpedoes. They homed in on the sound of a ship's propeller. They worked real good. The Frigate HMS Lagan was the first escort to be hit, she managed to limp into port on her own. The next day HMCS St. Croix was hit with 2 torpedoes, corvette HMCS Polyanthus picked up the survivors, then Polyanthus was hit and sunk with HMS Itchen (Frigate) picking up the survivors. Itchen was hit that nite very close to us, she just disappeared (I saw it happen) pieces of her landed all over our deck. This was about the scariest incident ever, and there was plenty of worried sailors, including yours truly. I made a promise to God that I'd never say the F word again if we made it through. (Note: And he didn't) When we arrived in Ireland after this convoy we were equipped with "foxer gear" which was a cable with vibrating bars at the end, creating a propeller-like disturbance well astern of us. I don't recall anymore torpedoes up the bum, but I also don't remember a torpedo blowing up the foxer gear either.

While I was on the Morden we were in a real bad storm (one of many) but this one was a lulu. The Commodore, and Vice Commodore of the convoy turned turtle (all hands lost) we did a 90 degree list with the bridge wing under water - we didn't know whether we were coming up again. It seemed like a lifetime. But it was awfully nice when she swung and righted herself. This is recorded in Stephen Leacock's "Canada's War at Sea".

While we were in Gibraltar, one nite on shore leave we hooked up with some Aussie Air Force boys. Got in a fight, helped them out, and they invited us to their camp for a flight the next day. They were going up on a practise bombing flight over the Mediterranean- it was a Wellington "Wimpy". They machine gunned a target towed by an old bi-plane and then they bombed a target towed by a tug. Then they took off flying over French Morocco, and then up over Spain, where we could see the bull fight arena. On the way home, the pilot asked me if I wanted to fly the plane. So I took over, after he told me what to do - it was great! I'm sure he was watching the controls very very carefully. After we landed we went skinny dipping in the Med, then back to their "wet canteen". Everything was on the house. (We must have done something right.)

I was on the Morden for about a year, was sent to signal school in Halifax for my Leading/Coder rating. I graduated as a "killick" and lost my ship. I was shipped down to the barracks in Boston, Massachusetts (U.S. Navy) - now that was another story - the U.S.N. was the cream of the crop - the meals were on a menu each day with a choice of meat, veg, and dessert (pie, cake, tarts) milk shakes - you wouldn't believe. Beer was 50 cents for a large pitcher, and when we went ashore, everyplace we went the locals paid our way. (We didn't turn them down.) After about a month there - (I was hoping they had forgotten me) I was drafted aboard a destroyer escort as skeleton crew, to take her across to the U.K. The D.E. was sold/given to the Royal Navy, so the crew was all R.N. except about 12 Canadians, including myself. Since it was Royal Navy, they were on RN rations (which meant no noon meal, only crackers and cheese). I don't know how this all started but there was a delegation (not me) went to the Captain and told him the RCN should get Cdn rations. (This was a small mutiny is what the RN told the Cdns). However the Captain put the entire crew on Canadian rations. We took the D.E. to Plymouth and then travelled by train up to Niobe Scotland (a barracks). I was there for awhile, then drafted to a newly constructed Castle Class corvette HMCS St. Thomas - at Newcastle on Tyne. The Captain had a special meeting on the quarterdeck where he informed us that we were to be very careful about the amount of beer that we would drink ashore on leave. He said the beer was the strongest we would ever encounter because it was brewed special for the miners in Yorkshire. Of course we didn't believe him, but you know he was so right. We did "work ups" in Tobermory and joined Escort Group C3 in Londonderry and was an ocean escort with convoys to St. John's.

St. Thomas along with the Escort Group was allocated a patrol grid during Operation "Juno" - "D" Day invasion of France - not very exciting we didn't see a thing, our grid was on the outskirts.

I took sick on a trip with convoy to Newfoundland, it was diagnosed as appendicitis, I was curled up in the fetal position in a bunk in the sick bay on the ship. My worst fear was that the sick bay "tiffy" would sharpen a kitchen knife and cut me open. There was a surgeon on one of the destroyers and I heard from my buddies that they might transfer him to operate if things got bad. We did leave the convoy and headed for St. John's one day early. I was shipped off to the hospital in Newfoundland, where it was established that I had an abscessed appendix, I was put on I.V. for a few weeks, then the Doctor discharged me with orders that I not go back to sea, but have my appendix out in 6 weeks.

I hung around for a few weeks then I went back to see the surgeon and asked him if I could go home on leave, he said "that's a good idea". I had been home for about 3 weeks, then I went down to King George School on Gage N., (Hamilton), it was an army hospital. I asked the Chief Surgeon Captain Barber if he would take my appendix out. He said he would and sent for my records. I was in hospital for a couple of weeks, then he gave me 2 weeks leave. So I was home for 2 months. After returning to Halifax I was drafted aboard the Frigate HMCS Stettler. I was at sea on board when the war was declared ended (I decoded the messages). Later in the day we received a message to "splice the main brace" which meant that we all got a tot of rum. With that tot and some of the ones we had saved - we celebrated.

I have been running off at the mouth, but I think I felt now that wouldn't it be terrible if one of those submarines didn't know the war was over, and we would be the one to get it.

Other remembrances:

Didn't dance much as a kid, even tho we went to barn dances (we didn't know what we were doing) It wasn't till I was away that I learned to jitterbug aboard ship, so that when we went shore there was something to do. A lot of the hostels - YMCA, Knights of Columbus, Sally Ann, all held dances with cokes and sandwiches.

The first ferry ride I can remember was from Larne to Stranrack (?) Scotland across the Irish Sea during the war, when we went on leave to London. I still can't believe the number of sailors that were seasick on this trip. It was a very rough trip.

I learned to cook from my Mom and also from trial and error during my shipboard days. When the ship provisioned at each stop we would steal a side of pork, bacon, a crate of eggs, etc. and have our own little cookfest in the mess - we were never caught also.

I was only in one military parade before going away, it was from the barracks to downtown towing the old antique cannon they had (and still have). We stopped in front of the Connaught Hotel (Hamilton) and fired a blank wadding that nearly blew out all our ears. The next parade was VE Day 1995 and when I saw the Lancaster fly over us, there was a tear in my eye.