

Willcox Story

General release

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Healy

An Eastern Canadian port – Few are the roles the navy can't play these days but the latest one to come to light – train busting – was told recently by Lieut. Frank Willcox, R.C.N.V.R., of Montreal, and would make even Ripley sit up and listen.

Enroute to his home on foreign service leave after two-and-a half years at sea, Willcox told of the part he played in the Italian campaign while serving for the past nine months as gunnery officer aboard a Royal Navy destroyer flotilla leader. Since he joined the navy in April, 1940, Willcox has served in five ships. He went overseas in October, 1942.

After the start of the Italian campaign his flotilla did just about everything a ship could do in an invasion – troops landing, escort work, anti-aircraft and anti-U boat attacks, survivor rescues and bombardments, but he likes best to tell of the time they sneaked in close enough to the Italian coast to blow up two railway trains and then finish off by sinking four trawlers.

"We had bombarded both the east and west coasts of Italy," he said. "This particular night – we did all our bombarding at night – we fired our star shells and let go at the trains with our twin 4.7 power mounted guns. You can imagine the rest when we were firing at about 7,000 yards. Then as we prepared to get away we spotted four trawlers trying to get supplies up the coast back of the enemy lines. We sank all four quickly.

"It was just a case of going in as close as we could get, lighting the night up with star shells, bombarding like hell and then getting out of there as quickly as possible."

Aircraft attacks were their greatest worry and although they shot many down, it was during one of these attacks that Willcox nearly lost his life. They were lead ship during the first attack on the Anzio beachhead when their sister ship was sent to the bottom and their own bows blown off by serial torpedoes.

"It struck me at the time," he said, "as the perfect night for enemy aircraft to attack because of the low-hanging clouds. We started in about two o'clock in the morning. At about three the stuff started to come at us. We were abeam H.M.S. — [their sister ship] when a plane came out of the clouds. When the torpedo hit the water it leaped up about 30 feet and came down on its tail. We thought it was finished but it straightened out and came for us. The captain swung the ship hard to port and the torpedo passed our bows and hit the other ship dead amidships. There was an explosion and she disappeared.

"About 150 men were lost," he added, "but we picked up 77 survivors. Then we got it ourselves. We didn't see it coming but the torpedo blew our bows off. We crawled back to Naples at four knots under escort and considered ourselves very lucky."

A Chartered Accountant in Montreal before the war, his wife lives at 2920 Rue Van Horne, Montreal. On completing his leave, Willcox will take up his new appointment as gunnery officer on the staff of the Comander-in-Chief, Canadian North West Atlantic.