

FOR RELEASE: 10:00 P.M., E.D.T., Tuesday, March 23

HEALY

An Eastern Canadian Port – Two ships sunk from under him, and he still loves the sea.

That's the story of Regulating Petty Officer Fred Johnson, R.C.N., of Victoria and St. Catherines, Ont.

Now on the staff of H.M.C.S. "STADACONA" Regulating Office, Johnson joined the navy back in 1928, and during years at sea has had many close calls – but none like the time he was trapped in the boiler room of a sinking ship, and lived to tell the tale.

"Three of us were in the boiler room when the ship was hit," he recalled. "There was a deafening roar and the lights went out. We scrambled for the stoke-hole to escape, but when I was half way up I remembered I forgot my life belt, so dashed back to get it. The other two reached the deck and safety.

"Just as I returned to the boiler room, the bulkheads caved in, and torrents of water rushed in on top of me," he said. "I thought I was a goner. The water rose to within a foot of the deck head. I splashed around, hollering my head off and groping for some means of escape."

Those agonizing moments "seemed like eternity" to Johnson as he frantically grasped for anything he could lay his hands on to keep him above the water. The water kept rising and he could barely keep his nose above it, gasping for air. The oil fumes added to his predicament.

"The last thing I remember," he said, "was grabbing one of the steam pipes and banging on for dear life. I guess that was when I lost consciousness."

When he awoke, he was lying on the quarter-deck of another ship and looking into the eyes of a surgeon lieutenant, working frantically to pump the water from his lungs.

"How I escaped from that boiler room is something I'll never know, I guess. Nobody could tell me. In all the commotion they couldn't even recall taking me aboard the other ship.

"I just consider myself a pretty lucky guy. About 50 men went down with the ship. Maybe it was one of them who got me out of the boiler room alive."

Johnson's next ship was commissioned overseas in October, 1941, during the London aerial blitz. The crew were in the midst of the worst of it, but none were lost or injured.

"I didn't have such a close call when that ship went down in the Atlantic," Johnson said, "but I was a veteran then anyway.

"We were steaming along on convoy escort. Everything was nice and quiet when the loud crash came. Again I was in the boiler room, but this time remembered to take my life-belt with me – and a flashlight, too.

"When I got up top the crew were abandoning ship, so I followed suit and jumped overboard. Only about 23 of us survived. We were picked up by a merchantman and taken to Bermuda. Our ship sank quickly, and 144 of the crew went down with her. It was pretty grim."