

IN MEMORIAM

Saying goodbye to a hero

One of province's oldest Second World War veterans leaves legacy of kindness

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SALTWIRE NETWORK

Family and friends are saying goodbye as they lay to rest a kind-hearted Second World War veteran who didn't hesitate to help others.

About a week after turning 101, Ralph Patterson slipped away peacefully in his sleep at Camp Hill on Aug. 4, his daughter, Gloria Macdonald, said.

"I look back on it and I'm amazed at him," said Macdonald, the eldest of Ralph's six children.

Macdonald said her father was kind and generous of his time, always sociable and eager to help those in need.

"If there was something to be done, he would go and help. He didn't think twice about offering," said Macdonald.

And he was always ready to lend a hand.

Ralph, who was born in Falmouth on July 27, 1919, joined the Canadian Navy in 1943. He served on the S.S. Columbia and they patrolled the shipping lanes north of St. John's, N.L. until February 1944 when the ship collided with ice. Two shipmates died as a result of injuries sustained during that voyage.

Ralph went on to serve aboard the anti-submarine frigate HMCS Nene for the duration of the war. It's aboard that ship that he saved the life of Frederick Rodway. A bad storm was brewing in Norway, and a wave caught the stoker and nearly hauled him overboard. As Rodway yelled for help, Ralph leapt into action. He grabbed a nearby rail and offered his hand to the sailor in distress.

"I had a hold of the depth charge rack and the wave threw us and we both landed in back of the ship. I crawled up close to him and hung on," the able seaman recalled in an article published in the Hants Journal in 2010.



he said.

Ralph wrote out his findings in long-form and then used a typewriter to transfer his recorded family tree information.

"He was a real source of information for people in the community who were searching for their own families," he said.

"For him, it was something that he was really happy to do. He liked to be able to help people that way and he put a lot of time and effort into it."

While he was still able to drive, Ralph would often seek out long-forgotten graveyards in hopes of piecing together more history.

"He was just an amateur investigator. While he could still drive, he used to travel back roads to old graveyards," he said.

"If he heard so-and-so was buried somewhere here, he would go and sometimes he would find ... the graveyards had been abandoned but the stones were still there," his son said, adding Ralph would then preserve the information.

Garnet said he'd like to see that information make its way to the local historical society.

PROUD OF FAMILY

Garnet described his father as being kind and patient.

"He was quiet, but he had kind of a sneaky sense of humour that came out when you were chatting with him," he said. "I had different people tell me like how funny and witty he was when they worked with him. He was just a positive person to work with."

And wherever he worked, he was sure to work hard. He had six children to feed.

"We never had a lot but he always tried to do whatever he could for us,"

Growing up, his kids didn't know about his heroic efforts.

"We hadn't heard very much about his war service growing up," said Garnet Patterson, one of his five sons.

In fact, he rarely spoke of the war until his ship's company began organizing reunions in the 1980s. It was there, in 1985, he reconnected with Rodway and they shared the tale of their amazing rescue. The pair stayed in touch in the years that followed. Rodway died in 2011.

Ralph received a framed letter signed by Canada's Minister of Defence, Bill McKnight, in June 1989, to recognize the rescue.

Ralph received several medals for his service, with the last one commemorating HMCS Nene's role in aiding Murmansk, Russia, with supplies during the war.

"When he was aboard the Nene, they were escorting convoys at the time. They escorted from Halifax over to England," his son said, adding HMCS Nene escorted three convoys from Scotland up along the coast of Norway where all the German submarine bases were.

"Three times they went up through that and lived to tell the tale," he said.

LIFE AFTER WARTIME

After returning home from the war, Ralph married Harriet Hennigar and had six children: Gloria, Garnet, Brian, Terry, Kevin and Robin. He worked at Stedmans in Windsor as a stock manager for several years before working at the Nova Scotia Freemasons' Home in Windsor until his retirement.

Ralph's father, Arthur Patterson, was the caretaker of the Freemasons' facility for 27 years and Ralph took care of him when he eventually resided there.

Even in retirement, Macdonald said her father would often drop by and cut hair for the men who lived at the senior's home.

"He always put other people first," Garnet said, noting his dad became interested in genealogy when he retired.

"He started to get into the family tree and tracing back and finding more information about his ancestors and extended family in all directions,"

Ralph Patterson as pictured in his 20s during the Second World War.

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Second World War veteran Ralph Patterson, pictured at his 100th birthday celebration in 2019, started opening up about his naval experiences in the 1980s. His family didn't know he had saved a man's life until then.

and go for picnics or drives. He would drive here, there and everywhere. We saw a lot of Nova Scotia while we were growing up. There weren't too many roads we hadn't travelled. Anything that you could reach in a day's trip, we have probably been there," he said.

Leading up to the war effort, Ralph worked on farms and later as a transport truck driver. He didn't have a chance to get a full education so he was proud of his children as they progressed through the grades.

"I was the first person in our family to attend university and I know that meant a lot to him," he said.

"I think the biggest thing for me is that he didn't pressure us, and he didn't make demands on us, but he supported us. That was the case up until he died."

Ralph is survived by his six children and two stepchildren, 12 grandchildren and 13-great-grandchildren, his sister Gladys, plus numerous family members. He was predeceased by his first wife, Harriet, and second wife, Hazel, five siblings, and two grandchildren.

FINAL BIRTHDAY

Ralph lived and farmed on a property behind the Hants Community Hospital for decades before moving to an O'Brien Street apartment where he spent his senior years. He lived in Windsor until June when he moved to the Camp Hill Memorial Hospital.

"He had done his isolation there for 14 days with flying colours and he wasn't happy he couldn't have visitors on the floor," said Macdonald, adding once he passed his COVID-19 screening, he could see visitors outside, which was always a highlight for him.

"I had talked to him on his birthday. He was chipper and telling me who had called him, and I didn't stay on the phone too long because I figured there would be more people calling him," she said, adding he always enjoyed socializing.

"He knew people everywhere. He had met so many people over the years that when we sat down to try to figure out who to contact, two of my brothers said, 'Well, who didn't he know?'" Macdonald said.