

# Archives & Collections Society

## 100 Years of Our Navy

### Naval Memories of Harry Walmsley

In 1942, Harry Walmsley, a young linotype operator at *The Picton Gazette*, decided to join the war effort because it was the “thing to do.” After enlisting in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserves at HMCS *Cataraqui* on Brock Street in Kingston, Harry went to Halifax for training where he was assigned to the corvette HMCS *Moosejaw*, and for a brief period, he escorted convoy ships from Quebec City to Goosebay Port in Labrador. Harry soon returned to Halifax where he joined the Bangor class minesweeper HMCS *Georgian*, pennant J144, as an Able Seaman Anti-Aircraft, Third Class. Looking back on his training, comprised primarily of marching, Harry does not feel that it prepared him for the real-life situations he would face in the war.

Harry remembers the challenges that came with detecting and destroying German mines because of the timers attached to the mine anchors that controlled their activation. To Harry, minesweeping was a “never-ending job”--- his ship could sweep the same area all day and still not discover all the mines, since more would pop up the next day.

Harry recalls his awareness of the ever-present danger of being on the open ocean during wartime and the constant threat of a mine detonating at any time. He experienced a “close call” when the *Georgian* was ordered to sweep down the French coast near Brest; on their way, they received an urgent message warning them not to go any further because the Germans were still in the area. On another occasion, the *Georgian*, on her way back to Canada, ran out of fuel just 100 miles off St John’s. The crew, waiting silently for over twenty-four hours for a tug to come to their rescue, felt like “sitting ducks,” vulnerable to enemy subs. Back on land, Harry was “glad to get home.”



In June of 1944, Harry found himself in Normandy during the D-Day invasion. The *Georgian* arrived off the Omaha beaches where at least three destroyers, their decks level with the water after mines had blown out their hulls, were between his ship and the shore. Throughout the course of the battle, the *Georgian* managed to remain out of the way of enemy fire, leaving Harry time to watch the firework-like explosions from afar. Today, he still remembers D-Day as “the greatest show on earth.”

Although Harry left the RCN at the end of the war to resume his job at *The Picton Gazette*, he feels that it reinforced in him a strong compulsion to be honest, because in the navy, “there was always someone looking over your shoulder.” When asked about his experiences in the RCN during the largest conflict of the twentieth century, Harry shrugs and casually comments that it was “just another job.”



Harry’s story, along with those of others from the Quinte region who served in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), the Wrens (WRCNS), the Sea Cadets, and the Maritime Command of today’s Canadian Forces, will be told at *100 Years of Our Navy*, the Archives and Collection Society’s celebration of the centennial of the Canadian Navy from July 3 to August 8. Held at *The Victory* on 205 Main Street, Picton, this unique exhibition includes a display of rarely-seen naval photographs and other memorabilia, complemented by an original ACS-produced documentary with interviews of people from Prince Edward County, Belleville, Trenton, and Kingston involved in Canada’s naval service, from its inception to the present.

From July 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup>, large 10 ft by 3ft models of the *HMCS Ville de Quebec 332*, *HMCS Cornerbrook 878*, and *HMCS Kingston 700* from the Department of Defence will also be on display at *The Victory* on a stopover between Halifax and Vancouver. Other models include local artist Hugh Charlebois’s flower class corvette *HMCS Demorestville* and a Type VIIC German Uboat from World War II. In addition, naval art by members of the Canadian Society of Marine Artists will hang on the walls.

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