

# A Prairie Boy's Tale

**By Andy Irwin**

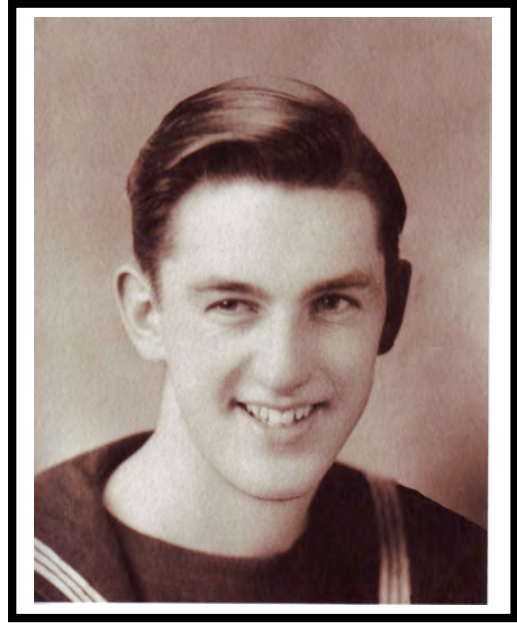
I was born in Regina, Saskatchewan on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1925. We lived in Yorkton until 1931, when, after my parents separated, my mother moved my sister and me to New Westminster, BC where we lived with my grandmother. I attended Lord Kelvin Elementary School, and then on to Lord Lister Junior High, which in those days included grades 7, 8 and 9.

There were several minor diplomatic crises between Britain and France on one side, and Germany over the latter's aggressive actions in Europe in 1937-38. Consequently, by 1939 Britain became very concerned and, to get Canada on their side, arranged a Royal Tour for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. New Westminster, known as the Royal City, annually held May Day events. On this particular occasion I was asked to lead a Semaphore Flag presentation in their honour. It was an exciting assignment for a fourteen year old.

When World War II broke out in September 1939 I was a newspaper delivery boy for the Vancouver Daily Province. Newspapers were the main source of news in those days; television had not yet entered our lives. On that fateful Sunday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> I was standing at a Street Car stop yelling, "Extra! Extra! Read all about it. Britain and France go to war with Germany!" Newspapers sold for 5 cents, of which I received just 2 cents. I was a Boy Scout and enjoyed doing all the activities involved.

Living where I did, on the shores of the Fraser River, I was always going down to the docks watching the foreign vessels unloading products from, to me, unknown countries; and loading lumber from the local mills for their return trip to their homelands.

The Fraser was a major source for the famous Sockeye Salmon and many other species of fish. I would spend hours watching vessels unload their catches, which were then delivered to local canneries for processing. These activities and my attempts to build small boats wetted my appetite for the sea.

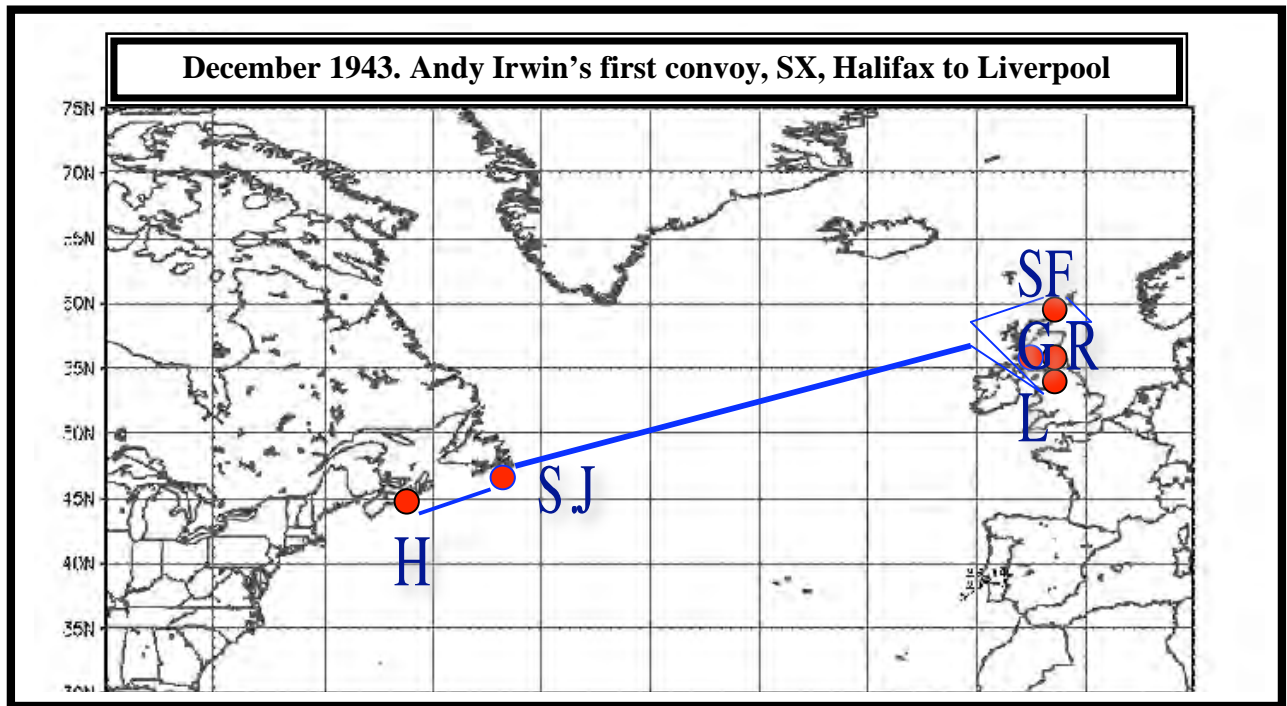


**Andy Irwin, 1944**

In the fall of 1941 a Sea Cadet Force was being formed and I was one of the first to leave 'scouting' and join Sea Cadets. I really enjoyed the training and discipline and in less than a year became a Leading Cadet. I think my Scout training helped.

In February 1943, at the age of 17, I joined the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman. I earned the princely sum of \$1.30 a day, plus room, board and clothing. My Basic training was done at HMCS Discovery in Stanley Park, Vancouver, just an hour away by electrified train. Following this, we went to HMCS Naden in Esquimalt (Victoria). Every second week I would catch one of the Canadian Pacific Steamers and go home for a few days.

In late September 1943, after two weeks of 'embarkation leave' I boarded the Canadian National passenger train for the trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia. I was to be stationed at the 'Stone Boat' HMCS Stadacona. Shortly after, I was assigned to the (British) Royal Navy Algerian Minesweeper, *HMS Lightfoot*. We did work-ups (exercises in gunnery, ship maneuvers, etc) out of Halifax. By early December we were deemed ready for convoy escort duties.



### Slow Convoy SX, December 1943

In mid-December we departed Halifax bound for St. John's Newfoundland (Newfie John) where we were to pick up an eastbound convoy to Britain. A few hours out of Halifax we hit severe storms for Force 7-8 and had to seek shelter of 24 hours in Argentia, Newfoundland. The convoy we were to join was an SX, meaning slow moving (6 knots) so when the storm subsided we, being able to do 15 knots, picked up our station before the convoy was too far out to sea.

Our convoy consisted of 40 ships in five rows of eight. The escort group was made up of one destroyer, four corvettes and *HMS Lightfoot*. We spent Christmas at sea, and as we were only covering 170 miles a day, the trip took close to two weeks. We encountered one U-boat, which managed to get inside the convoy lines, and sunk one freighter before being driven off by a depth charge attack.

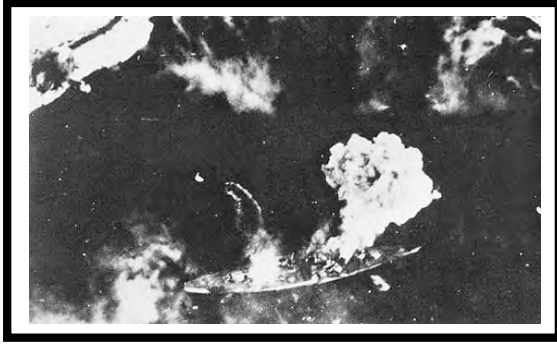
Finally we docked in Liverpool, the Western Approaches HQ city for Britain's Atlantic operations. After delivering the convoy we left for Rosyth, a journey that took us north along Britain's west coast, across Scotland's north coast and south along the east coast to Rosyth (Edinburgh),

where we handed *Lightfoot* to the Royal Navy.

On our first night in Rosyth, Port Watch was given shore leave until midnight. A group of us went into Edinburgh and discovered the Palais de Danse. There were two bands on a revolving stage. We had a great evening dancing with the Scottish lassies. However, when we returned to the ship I discovered that one of those lovely lassies had lifted my wallet! I had no ID and this resulted in me being confined to the ship for seven days. I had to remain on board under an all Royal Navy crew!

After confinement, I was sent to the Canadian Manning Depot HMCS Niobe in Greenock, on the River Clyde near Glasgow. Within a few days I, along with 50 others, was sent to the John Brown's Shipyard (builders of the famous *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*) as the pre-commissioning crew of the *HMCS Algonquin*.

We were formally commissioned on February 17, 1944 under the command of then 30-year-old Lieutenant Commander Desmond W. Piers, DSO, RCN. 'Debbie' as he was known, was a permanent Navy type and previously served for a short time as the Commanding Officer of *HMCS Restigouche* (Rusty Guts) when he was 29.



### Hits on the Tirpitz

We undertook workups on the Clyde and in the Irish Sea. In early March we proceeded to Scapa Flow, the British Home Fleet base in the Orkney Isles. We were the junior vessel attached to the 26<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla. Here we did some more serious workups, practicing gunnery and anti-submarine exercises, along with torpedo and anti-aircraft shoots.

On March 31 we sailed from Scapa Flow for a major offensive against the German Battleship *Tirpitz*, holed up in Alta Fjord in Northern Norway. This was known as Operation Tungsten and consisted of the Fleet Carriers *HMS Victorious* and *HMS Furious*, the Victory Carriers, *HMS Searcher*, *Emperor* and *Fencer*, carrying 40 barracuda bombers and 40 fighters. The 26<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla with eight destroyers, including *HMCS Algonquin* and our sister ship, *HMCS Sioux*, formed the escort group.

The *Tirpitz* was located and 15 direct hits were made doing extensive damage to her upper deck, including destroying her 15-inch 'B' Guns. There were also casualties, 122 of her crew of 2400 were killed and over 300 injured. We were designated to be the rescue vessel for the operation. One of the fighters overshot the carrier deck and we proceeded to pick up the pilot. We put our whaler (an 8 man rowboat) over the side and eventually picked up a cold and soggy pilot. This was a risky business because *Algonquin* was at a dead stop for 30 minutes and we were an easy U-boat target.

We continued operations along the Norwegian coast until May 25, 1944 when our destroyer Flotilla was ordered to

Portsmouth on the south coast of England. We actually anchored off Seaview on the Isle of Wight on May 27. I turned 19 the following day.

We could tell that something big was going on because of all the shipping. Speculation was running wild. We carried out several night patrols in the English Channel on June 4. On the afternoon of June 5, we learned that *Operation Neptune*, the naval component of the invasion of Europe was to commence that evening.

At 1600hrs, we weighed anchor and proceeded to our rendezvous point off Cowes, Isle of Wight where we joined with *HMS Hillary* the Headquarters ship of Force 'J' (Juno Beach). Enroute we passed *HMCS Prince Henry* and *HMCS Prince David*, two former passenger liners from the BC coast. Our initial role was to escort *HMS Hillary*, which carried Major General Keller, Commanding Officer of the Third Canadian Division, and his staff, to the assault area off the Normandy coast.

*HMS Hillary* got underway at 1800hrs with *HMCS Algonquin* astern followed by a flotilla of LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) carrying Royal Marine commandos. As we steamed through the Solent, *Clear the Lower Decks* was piped and all hands gathered around the CO, Lt. Commander Piers, DSC. The route to the beaches of Normandy was swept of mines and the channel marked with Dan Buoys (Blue Lights). While a surface attack was possible, the biggest danger was drifting mines.

We closed up action stations at midnight and sailed in darkness until 0500 hrs when the sky started to brighten. What a sight! Ships of every size, landing craft and barges as far as the eye could see. It was amazing that there had been no collisions reported during the crossing.

At 0600 hrs the battleships and cruisers opened fire on the shore batteries and other defense positions. The noise was thunderous. I believe *HMS Rodney* was outbound on Juno Beach and it was eerie to see her 16-inch shells passing overhead, inbound for the beach.





**Andy Irwin (3<sup>rd</sup> from left standing) cleaning 4.7 gun off Juno Beach.**

with Allied aircraft; a huge mass of bombers inbound to blast shore positions followed by aircraft towing gliders loaded with troops. We could see them going in to land under heavy fire. It was unnerving to see some hit and disintegrate.

We commenced our bombardment at 0700 hrs. Our initial target was a battery of two 88mm guns. When they were silenced, we targeted other houses and building along the shoreline. We ceased fire at around 0745 hrs in preparation for H hour (landing time) for the infantry. They had been proceeding past us in landing craft during our bombardment and were due to hit the beaches at 0800 hrs.

At 0900 hrs, as we were slowly moving up and down the landing area, an LCI came along side and asked us to take off casualties. A mortar had landed in their craft killing one and injuring five. They were taken to sickbay and treated by 'Doc' Dickson. Two later died of their wounds.

The landings were well underway but at 1100 hrs we received a call from our Artillery Officer spotter on shore to take out three 88mm German guns that were holding up our advancing troops three miles inland. Our first 4.7 guns put the first salvo short;

On the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-Day, I met Sgt. Jean Minville, one of the Chaudiere's we helped!

On Sunday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, we escorted the battleship *HMS Rodney* from Portsmouth back to Normandy. On board with us was General H.D.G. Crerar, C.B. JXS.O Commander of the First Canadian Army, and his staff of 22 officers. This was a proud moment for *HMCS Algonquin* as it was the first time a Canadian Army Commander, flying his Canadian Army Standard from our starboard yardarm, had gone into battle in a Canadian Warship.

On June 19, (D+13) we were called to bombard the eastern flank at Gonnerville where commandos were to make a dawn attack. We later received this signal: "The Commanding officer and all ranks of the 45<sup>th</sup> Royal Marine commando wish to record their appreciation of the excellent support received during our operation. Its success was largely due to your co-operation."

On one of our last Normandy patrols, we were returning to base after dodging parachute mines, when we witnessed our patrol partner, *HMS Swift*, hit a mine and sink within minutes.

On June 28, 1944 we departed



**HMCS Algonquin, circa 1944**

*Operation Neptune* to return to Scapa Flow. We again commenced operations with the fleet to attack shipping along the Norwegian coast. In August, a Victory Class carrier, *HMS Nabob*, with an all-Canadian crew, was assigned to Operational Group. She was commanded by Captain Horatio Nelson Lay, RCN!

Late on August 16, 1944 we departed for *Operation Goodwood* 1 and 2 against *Tirpitz*. Our attack group consisted of the Battleship *HMS Duke of York*, three cruisers, three fleet carriers, two escort carriers and the 26<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla. The aircraft attacked in the morning and afternoon of August 22.

As we were withdrawing for the night, *HMS Nabob* was torpedoed and eight minutes later, *HMS Bickerton* was also torpedoed. We picked up over 200 survivors of *Nabob*, which was still able to limp back to Scapa. The operations against *Tirpitz* carried on until August 29.

After a convoy to Murmansk in Northern Russia, we joined an attack group that targeted enemy shipping off the Norwegian coast. The group included two cruisers and four destroyers. *Operation Counterblast* was a success. We attacked an enemy convoy and destroyed eleven of its ships and left one aground and burning.

In November we learned that *Tirpitz* had finally been sunk with the loss of 1204 killed and 806 survivors. The RAF had sent a force of 32 Lancaster bombers on *Operation Catechism*. One bomb had a direct hit on a magazine (ammunition), which spelled the end.

For the balance of the war we continued action in Norwegian waters and, during the Christmas and New Year of 1944/45 also with convoy runs back to Murmansk. On the Murmansk run we were in the worst storm we'd ever experienced. We could not keep the convoy together in a storm with Force 8-9 winds.

February 15, 1945 we arrived back in Canada. We were in Halifax for a refit, leave and all the good things of home. I passed my Officers Board before Captain 'D' in Halifax and after 30 days leave returned to HMCS Cornwallis for Officers training.

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 saw the end of hostilities in Europe. I was invited to 'sign Pacific' for more combat duty. I declined, took my discharge and returned home to attend the University of British Columbia.

*Andrew A. Irwin*

# ASSIGNMENT

# Memories of an Athabaskan Bride

By 'Vi' Connolly.



I would like to take you on a journey that was undertaken by a young woman, who at 19 was a newlywed, working full time and living with her in-laws. That woman is me. It was early in 1942 and I had just said goodbye to my new husband Bill, who had left Hamilton for war. He joined HMCS Athabaskan, a destroyer in the Royal Canadian Navy. This journey unfolds over a period of three and a half years, marked by devastation and isolation; inspiration, faith and most of all, love.

On Sunday, April 30, 1944 I followed my usual routine. I went to church and sang in the choir. When I got home, my mother-in-law told me that I had a phone call from a Mrs. Hayes, whose son, Bill, was also on the Athabaskan. I called Mrs. Hayes and she asked if I'd heard from Bill. I told her of his most recent letter that had arrived the previous week. She said, "I mean more recently." I told her no, and that's when she burst out, "the ship went down last night!" Needless to say, I couldn't respond, I just collapsed in my mother-law's arms, who, immediately and without hesitation said, "Bill's OK!" Mother's intuition?

The news started the most devastating and frustrating times of my life, and that of our immediate family and friends. Yes, it was war after all and although I knew that tragedy could happen, it didn't lessen the constant ache in my heart.

Although the days that followed were so difficult to manage, it was the nighttime that I completely dreaded. It was impossible for me to fall asleep; visions engulfed me. I knew that Bill was a good swimmer; in fact he was a lifeguard. However, questions still flooded my mind. Was he able to swim to shore? Was he frightened that the enemy would find him? Was he wounded and still in frigid water calling for help? All I could do was to cling to my faith and pray that to God to send my Bill some help.



**'Vi' Connolly**

In the next few days, we learned that HMCS Athabaskan, with a crew of 260, had been torpedoed by a German ship. We also learned that HMCS Haida, the sister ship, had picked up 47 survivors who were named and were on their way home. My husband's name was not one of these so-called 'lucky' men, but Bill Hayes was.

When Bill Hayes' returned to Hamilton, I couldn't understand why he didn't come to see me right away. I soon learned that he had seen my Bill's action station, the communications section, blown right off the ship. This piece of information he had carefully chosen not to share with me. Bill did his best to explain that it was almost impossible for him to account for anyone's whereabouts in the water, as it was utter chaos. Of course, I was looking for any thread of hope on which to hang on to during this period of time.

In the weeks that followed, the Germans announced that they had picked up 85 survivors of the Athabaskan and that they had been sent to a POW camp. They also





### HMCS Athabaskan

stated that they had no intention of giving out those names. That left a total of 128 unaccounted for. We waited for three long, lonely and tortuous months before the Red Cross was able to convince the Germans to abide by the Geneva Conventions and release the names of the POWs.

Unlike today, communication in the early 1940s was scarce to none; there was no home telephone, no TV, no Internet. Our main sources of information were the radio, local newspapers and word of mouth. Eventually I received a telegram from the government telling me that Bill Connolly was "missing."

As time passed, the Red Cross provided the prisoners with a pre-printed post card. It was signed by my husband and sent to us confirming news that I had been hoping and praying for, that he was alive, albeit a prisoner in a German POW camp.

The news for many other families was not good, "Missing, presumed dead." I remember thinking how inconceivable and what a sheer sense of hopelessness this message gave to those families. Our hearts bled for them and we could only pray that they would receive the strength and courage to sustain them in their deepest sorrow.

Much later, we learned that 91 bodies had been washed ashore along 150 miles of French coast. The bodies were retrieved and buried in 9 different civilian cemeteries. Some could not be identified and the markers simply read, *Known only to God*. Today, 37 men are unaccounted for and their bodies remain in the sea.

The news of my Bill's capture reached us by ordinary mail. We had a darling postman on Locke Street, Hamilton. Every time he had a letter from my husband, he would ring the doorbell twice! The morning he recognized Bill's card in his pack, he came directly to our neighbourhood and along the way, he told all of our friends and neighbours the good news.

By the time he reached our house, there were at least a dozen men and women behind him. Some were waving flags and others were shouting, "He's alive, he's alive!" I was at work that morning, so my mother-in-law had the pleasure of receiving them. When I got word of the news, I told my boss and he enthusiastically let me home early that day to celebrate with my family.

As I took off down the stairs of the plant where I worked, everyone was



hammering on their machines, their way of saying, 'hooray.'

I was happy, but I must recount a short story about three young West Hamilton men named Bill. They all lived and grew up within a few blocks of each other but did not meet until they joined the Athabaskan in England. All three were in the communications branch of the ship. All three fates were different.

As I mentioned, Bill Hayes was the 'luckiest' of these young men of a ship later called 'The Unlucky Lady.' Bill was picked up by sister ship, HMCS Haida. My Bill was picked up by a German ship and became a POW. However, the most ill fated was Bill Stewart. Bill Stewart was a great pal of my Bill and he was reported missing, presumed dead. Sometimes it is hard to celebrate your good fortune while others suffer the most incomprehensible sorrow.

On a personal note, not knowing the fate of my husband took its toll on me. My family doctor suggested that I become more involved with the war effort. When Bill left for war, I was a telephone operator. Upon reading the Hamilton Spectator, I decided to answer an ad for work in a steel mill. There was a need as men were off to war.

I worked in a few places but the last place I worked was the Sawyer Massey Argus Company. I was asked to work on 'Top Secret' radial drill and drilled large holes into the edge of a 5" thick (12.5 cms) round steel base that would fit under a 4" (10 cms) naval gun.

I later learned that these gun mountings were placed under guns on Tribal Class Destroyers like my husband's ship, HMCS Athabaskan! Was this irony or destiny, or both?

It was truly exciting work and I remained there until my husband returned home. It was during this time that I had a photograph taken at the drill and it became a poster to illustrate the hard work that women in Hamilton were doing. It was for a campaign to showcase 'Women in the Workforce.' With thousands of other women in Hamilton and across Canada, we played a part in the war effort.



**Bill Connolly and Vi, 1942**

Although this period of challenge lasted only three and a half years of my 67 years of married life with Bill, at the time it seemed like a lifetime. When I look back, I realize that going through those tumultuous times shaped me and made me the person I am today.

To all of you I say, go forward and enjoy every precious moment of your own life journey.

*Vi Connolly*

# ASSIGNMENT

# A U-Boat Officer's Story

**Werner Hirschmann**  
**Chief Engineer U190**





The history of war is mostly taught as a case of us against them, of good against evil and it is always written by the victors. The world is shown only in black and white whereas in reality there are just various shades of grey. On both sides lives are lost, tears are shed, cemeteries are places of remembrance. Having been on the side of the losers I am glad to be allowed to tell my own story of fighting for my country.

The treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War left Germany in a peculiar situation. Let me illustrate this by presenting a completely hypothetical case. Let us assume that for some reason or other the Province of Quebec had been ceded to the United States, cutting Canada into two parts. To get from one part to the other one had to cross the border between Canada and the U.S., being strip searched and harassed before finally being allowed to reach the other part of Canada. That describes to some extent the effect the Polish Corridor had on German travellers. To avoid the hassle at the border Germans usually went by sea to get to East Prussia.

That this situation presented an international problem was almost universally recognized, but as a British Historian Liddell Hart wrote in his *The Origins of the Second World War*, 'The purpose of political activity is to provide peace and prosperity; and in this case every statesman failed, for whatever reason.'

This is a story without heroes, and perhaps even without villains. These words describe our own feeling as kids going to an, to us, quite unnecessary war, especially since we had always looked at England as the country closest to us in culture and values. Germany was not fighting for world domination but simply in search for a solution to a problem. Apart from that Germans in general were, of course, complaining and bitching about their government as much as the inhabitants of all countries always do.

As a kid I became quite fascinated with Naval history. I read all the books describing the lives of Drake, de Ruyter, Nelson, Farragut and others and early on I

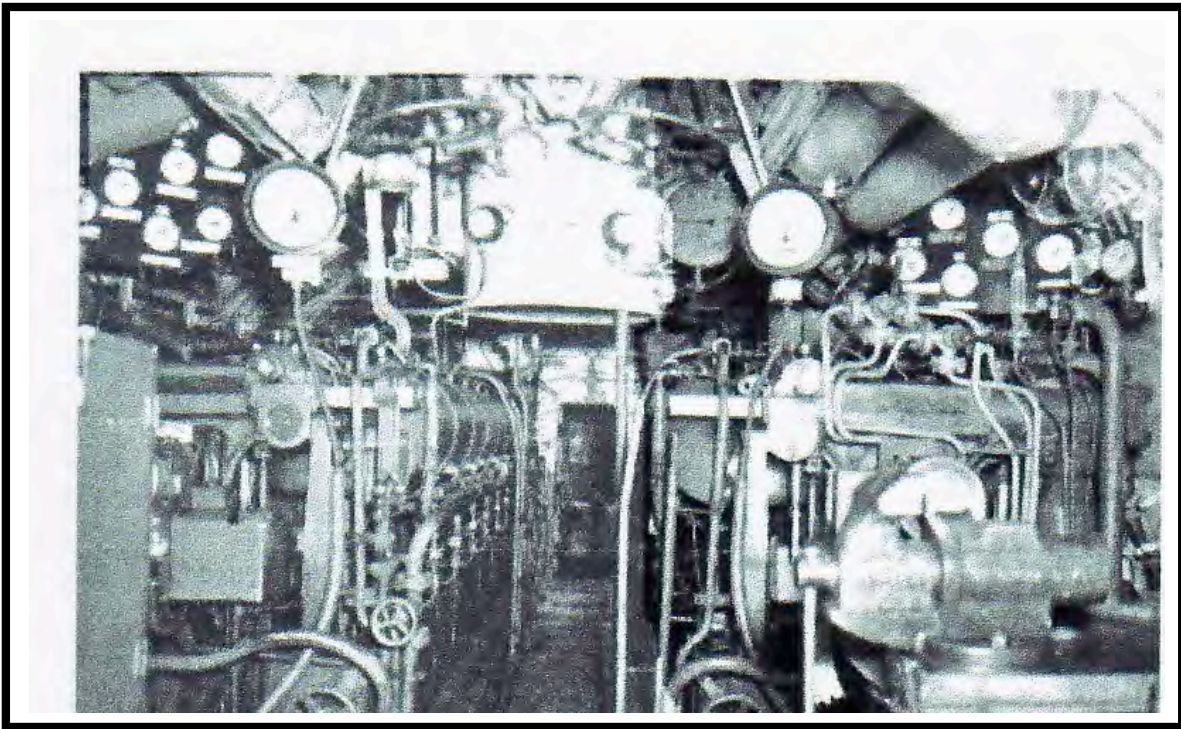


**Werner Hirschman circa 1943**

decided I wanted to go to sea and become a naval officer. Preferring engines to guns and torpedoes I wanted to become a naval engineer. Later, of course I had to find out that the Chief Engineer on a war ship had the responsibility for the commanding officer's coffee water boiling quickly enough. When I recently compared notes with the Chief Engineer of a Canadian Frigate I found out that his problem was the temperature of the commanding officer's bath water.

By the time I was accepted as a cadet at the age of 17 the war had broken out but that event did not affect my choice of a profession. I was simply going to do my job as an engineer, war or no war. Having read about submarines and their role in the First World War, it did not entice me at all to become part of that branch of the Navy. I was not interested in spending most of my time under the sea rather than on the surface. Unfortunately in the military you do what you are told to do and I was told to join the submarine force. After extensive training over more than two years I became the Chief





Engineer of a submarine. In our submarines the Chief Engineer, apart from having responsibility for the function, maintenance and damage control of all technical equipment, was also the diving officer, in control of all the activities while being submerged. As such the fate of a submarine was very much in the hands of the Chief Engineer.

The war at sea for German submarines consisted of two very separate periods. The war began with the so-called Happy Times, when the efforts to sink cargo ships supplying England with its necessities was very successful, but later changed into what we called the Sour Pickle Time, when the chances of survival for us became almost non-existent. Altogether we had about 820 submarines that became engaged in facing the enemy and we lost about 780. Of about 40,000 submariners about 30,000 died and about 5,000 became prisoners-of-war. Survival was not a matter of skill, courage or experience - it was a matter of luck.

In the last year of the war just being detected by surface vessels or aircraft inevitably sealed the fate of that submarine. And yet, fully aware of our chances of survival, we nevertheless just continued to do what we considered our duty, namely practice our profession. Being on leave, after two weeks at home we got ants in our pants

and couldn't wait to go out on the next mission again, supported by our irrational belief that it would always be the other guy who wouldn't come back. We, on the other hand, had all the skills to avoid destruction!

The world is always being told how terrible life was on our submarines but which other fighting soldier, especially in the infantry, had three warm meals a day, always had a warm bunk, kept warm by the guy who just went on watch, slept up to 15 hours a day, and whose major problem was boredom?

For weeks we were fruitlessly looking for ships to attack but when we finally did our encounter with the enemy could very suddenly change our boredom into sheer terror. In a submarine under attack by depth charges one feels totally helpless. Since with the minimal speed available one can't run away and one can only hope that after the next explosion one is still alive. Anyone who claims not to be afraid in such situation is, in my opinion, a liar.

Movies about submarines under attack always show them rolling through arcs of 90 degrees with people hanging on for dear life or being thrown around like puppets. That is absolute nonsense. The submarine, being a mass of a thousand tons surrounded by an almost solid medium,



**Werner Hirschmann takes a cigarette break**

namely water, doesn't move at all. A submarine under attack is visually as interesting as watching paint dry. Movie makers, find it important to add the imagined drama in order to sell their film. A depth charge exploding in close proximity feels like a blow with a giant sledge hammer on to an immovable object. The shock can cause tremendous damage and then the submariner has no longer time to be afraid but has to jump into immediate action to repair the damage. This can go on four hours or, with a few hours of respite in between, for a few days. But if the depth charge comes too close, nobody on the submarine will still be able to tell their tales.

After the encounter has ended the old bravado returns and one wouldn't change the life of a submariner for anybody else's. Submariners of any nation are extremely proud of the exalted status they enjoy. They always look at themselves as the elite of the armed forces and enjoy the perks that come with it, like extra pay for dangerous work and others. When a German submarine was lucky to come back from a mission after three to four months at sea it was always in need of extensive and time consuming repairs and updates. That allows for much more leave for their crews than in

any other branch of the armed forces. In addition we were spoiled with extra rations of merchandise otherwise no longer available like expensive wines and liquors, coffee, silk stockings - remember, there was no nylon yet - for their ladies and so on.

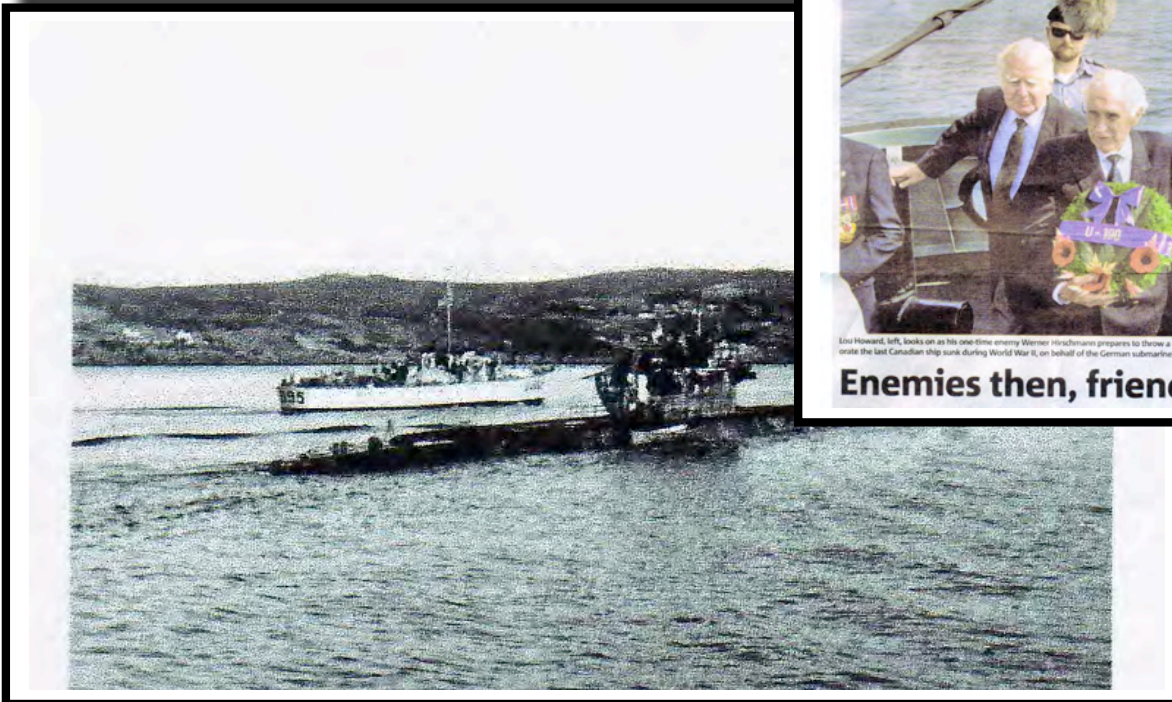
But being on leave was not always very pleasant with more and more German Cities being destroyed and having to spend quite a number of hours in an air raid shelter. I happened to be on leave when an incendiary plunged into the attic of our home causing a fire that I was lucky enough to extinguish.

Despite the war being one of history's biggest events we found it difficult to think about the war. It was a bit like the weather. Whether you liked it or not, you couldn't do anything about it. Complaining was of no use. And other things seemed to be much more important anyway. Whether my newest prospective girl friend would accept my invitation to go out, occupied my mind much more than the success or failures of our armies in Russia. I dreaded the thought of having to explain to the father of that - or another - girl friend why his daughter didn't come home the night before, more than having to explain to my commanding officer why the repairs to our boat had not been completed yet.

I did not fight in the war - I happen to live at a time of war. I simply did my job as a professional, namely to operate the boat under water, to keep it functional without any outside help and make sure it was able to return to port. It really wasn't all that different to anybody spending his working day in an office, except that our working days were up to four months long before we got home for dinner. Most of us, however, didn't come back to dinner at all.

Let me assure anybody who is emotionally overwhelmed by all the talk about the so-called sacrifice and laying down one's life when going to war that I had absolutely no intention to do so. As a matter of fact I haven't met any veteran from either side who did. We did our very best to keep our life and those who lost it had taken it away from them. Those who did not survive





#### **U190 surrenders to RCN, May 13, 1945**

the war did not sacrifice anything - they were sacrificed by incompetent politicians on all sides.

The absurdity of war is so clearly illustrated by the fact that veterans from both sides who years ago did their kill each other, today can live in peaceful harmony and genuine friendship together. My submarine sank the last Canadian warship, the HMCS Esquimalt, in April 1945, about three weeks before the end of the war. Since we submariners never saw or felt the fate of our victims it was only in 1986 that I read what happened to the 71 crew members of that minesweeper. Very few were killed by the explosion itself but since it took six hours before the survivors were finally picked out of the water only 26 were still alive.

In 1993 I met one of the survivors in Halifax and to the surprise of the media we became instant friends. As he put it in a radio interview, "We did our duty and he did his. He was lucky and we were not." Some people thought that it was entirely unnecessary for us to sink the Esquimalt at that time considering that we were obviously aware that Germany had lost the war. I don't believe that the commanding officer of the Esquimalt, under order to sink German

submarines, would have said to himself, if he had found us, that there was no point in sinking us since we had lost the war already.

In 1995, after laying a wreath at the memorial cairn for the Esquimalt I was made a card carrying Honorary Life Member of the Esquimalt Memorial Association. With many of these survivors I developed a deep and meaningful friendship and with my wife have been guests in their homes from coast to coast. Unfortunately today only one of them is still alive and well.

I might as well mention that my submarine surrendered to the Canadian Navy on May 13, 1945 and I became a prisoner-of-war at The Gateway Hotel in Gravenhurst in Ontario. It was the best time of my life until then and made me fall in love with Canada. We were treated like guests of the country. Not being happy in the destroyed Germany I came back in 1952 and have been a proud Canadian Citizen since 1957.

Contrary to many stories and myths about German submariners I hope I can convey the fact that we were neither heroes nor villains but just a bunch of very ordinary people being thrown in the turmoil of the World war by circumstances completely beyond our control.

# Assignment Activities