

WWII Navy - From Boys to Men

When I was a young boy growing up in Strathroy in 1939, Canada entered the war. We all had to have ration cards to buy most groceries and gasoline. I could see young men and women joining the armed forces and going off to war to fight for their country. Farm boys went to join but were sent home to grow food for the war effort. Without farmers, we could not supply food for the Allied countries and our fighting forces. Everyone worked at something for the war. Young children and school kids gathered tinfoil, aluminum, and scrap metal. Older ladies knit sweaters, socks, and mitts to help keep our soldiers warm. My mother worked in a war factory in Woodstock. She always said she made the bullets, and her boys fired them.

I was eager to join up but was not old enough, so I had to wait. The Navy was the only armed force that would take young men and boys 17 years of age. A day or two after my seventeenth birthday (1942), I hitchhiked to London to join the Navy. They welcomed me with open arms but sent me home with a letter that had to be signed by a parent, merchant, police chief, and a minister from a church. It took some talking to get my mother to sign, but she did. Mr. Statham the merchant, Chief Tanton, and Rev. Honeyman from the Presbyterian Church all signed. With the letter, I showed up at HMCS *Prevost* in London, was given a real fast medical and a Navy uniform. I was now a full-fledged member of the Royal Canadian Navy V.R. In a little over a week, I had to learn seamanship, knots and splices, Morse Code, and to read messages with flags. In less than 2 weeks, I was on a troop train with hundreds of Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel heading for Halifax on the east coast of Canada, some to board troop ships for overseas.

I was stationed at HMCS *Cornwallis* in Halifax, before *Cornwallis* moved to Deep Brook, N.S., to take more training, mostly on large guns. Before I was 18 years old, I found myself on HMCS *Beaver*, a sort of converted sweeper sweeping for mines on the east coast of Canada and the U.S.A. I was not on the *Beaver* very long and was drafted on HMCS *Annapolis*, an old 4 stacker destroyer given to Canada by the U.S.A. because Canada had hardly any fighting ships. The day I landed aboard with a bunch of other guys, young like me, the captain lined us up midship and gave us our welcome aboard address. He said now we can forget all that crap they taught us ashore. We were going to sea to fight a war, and he was not kidding. *We grew from boys to men really fast.*

Duty watches were 4 hours on and 4 hours off all the time we were at sea. For the first 2 or 3 weeks, my duty was up the mast in the crow's nest. With the ship rolling from port to starboard as well as pitching up and down I wondered why I ever joined the Navy. Was I ever seasick. I couldn't puke straight down or it would land on the officers on the bridge. So I puked in my hat and washed it out when I climbed down. For the first few days I think all the guys were sick. But no matter how sick you were you had to do your duty. One man not doing his duty, with floating mines and enemy U-boats with their torpedoes, could mean the ship could end its career beneath the waves. When the action bell sounded, I had to get down to the 4.7 mm cannon on the bow. Later my action station was on the twin Oerlikons, port side midship and then to the 10 pounder on the stern.



HMCS Annapolis

For the next few months, I graduated to the wheel house. I was now a helmsman steering the ship. I liked steering the ship with the gyro compass. I could keep on course with every click of the compass. But HMCS *Annapolis* was an old World War I destroyer, and the cables from the wheel house to the tiller flats, where the machine was to turn the rudder, would break. So I had to go outside to the stem of the ship and with a large spoked wheel had to steer the ship manually. Back there was only a magnetic compass. I would walk up one side of the wheel, the compass would swing away too far, so I would run up the other side. Nobody ever complained, but I could not keep on course back there. I was always glad to get back to the wheel house because I was always cold and wet back there. When our asdic operator got a ping on an enemy U-boat, the action bell would sound and the whole ship's company would close up to action stations. The ship would go full speed over the U-boat and fire ten depth charges in all different directions set to explode at 10 different depths in the water. Then we would go over the top and let go 10 more charges. We had to be going fast or we would blow our own stern off. On board, our depth charges had to be set on safe because if we were torpedoed and the ship was sinking and we were in the water and one charge went off, all people in the water would be killed.



Convoy advances while escorts drop depth charges

The duty of HMCS *Annapolis* was convoy duty and enemy U-boat patrol. We were on the triangle run Halifax, St. John's [sic], New York, Boston. Between ports we would be taking a convoy three or four hundred miles out in the ocean patrolling for enemy U-boats. Other times, we would take a convoy to join other convoys out of St John's [sic] heading across the North Atlantic. If we did not take a convoy, we would go up the St. Lawrence in search of U-boats. They were up the St. Lawrence sinking our merchant ships, even in sight of Quebec City. Canadian people did not hear about bodies being washed ashore along the river bank. That was supposed to be hushed up. The Canadian ferry Caribou loaded with a full load of passengers was sunk between North Sydney and Port Aux Basques by an enemy U-boat. There was no sign of the ferry after the torpedo struck, and very few survivors.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest running battle of World War II and the only one that took place close to North American shores and, at sea, was fought mainly by teenaged boys. Winston Churchill of England knew everything to fight the war had to come from this side of the ocean, and so did Hitler and his German fighting forces. The enemy did everything in their power to stop the North Atlantic convoys. With merchant ships and Navy ships on convoy to and from Russia and the British Isles, thousands of ships were sunk.



Sailors relaxing in crew's mess

I have been asked several times what it was like sailing in one of the small fighting ships on the North Atlantic. I can only tell what it was like on a World War I four-stacker destroyer. They were never intended to spend two or three weeks on end in the open North Atlantic. They were wretched to live in. Fresh water, food, bread, and milk were gone in a few days. The mess decks where the sailors lived, ate, and slept when they could, were below the sea level. Sound travels in water a long way. You could often hear depth charges and other explosions going off miles away. The living quarters were overcrowded more-so when crew size grew to man new equipment. Sea water always found its way in. Condensation dripped from the deck head. Bedding and clothing were always wet. The stench of unwashed bodies, vomit, and oil that seeped from fuel tanks was everywhere. It was bitter cold and wet up top, and there was no steam heat below. We were always hanging on to things because the ship was always slamming into rough seas, shuddering and heaving.

There was no end to the noise, and we were exhausted and sick. No one ever took their clothes off at sea. You never knew when we might hit a mine, an action station, or be struck by a torpedo. Fresh water was limited to drinking and cooking. There was not enough for washing, and there were no showers aboard. We cleaned and showered when we got to harbour. That is when we would be hooked to a dockyard water supply. Toilets at sea were flushed with sea water. Each day, two guys were on mess duty. Their job was to go to the galley and bring food down then, after the meal, wash the dishes. On occasion, when throwing the dish water over the side, all the silverware went into the ocean. That's when it was a battle to steal some from another mess. That was hard to do because every mess guarded their silverware pretty closely. But the worst part was if the ship lurched, and the dishpan went over also. I have seen us washing dishes with the pail we scrubbed the deck with.

Several hundred miles at sea, everyone on board came down with scabies. They were a nasty little bug that eats you up under the skin. Under my left arm and down my left side, I was bleeding by the time we got back to Halifax. Our Sick Bay Tiffy was really good at slapping on the iodine and putting on band aids but did not have many supplies for anything else. At Halifax, we were loaded into trucks and taken to Rockhead Hospital. At the hospital, we had to take off all our clothes and go into the hospital naked. We were marched into a really big shower room. Showers lined all four walls - I don't know, maybe 70 or 80 showers with no partitions, and two guys to a shower. Up by the ceiling in a glass cage, the medical officer sat and controlled all the water and temperatures. He got the water so hot our skin was red. Then, we reached into a door and got a stiff brush and some green stuff. You had to scrub your partner all over, then he had to scrub you. Unable to dry off, we went into a large room with bunks for the night. When they came for us in the morning, our skin was so tight, we could hardly move. A couple more days of this hot shower treatment, then a final inspection, and back to the ship. The ship had been steam-cleaned and disinfected. The treatment was 'kill or cure', but there was no more scabies.

After two or three weeks at sea with constant U-boat watch, action stations, and dropping depth charges every time we got a ping on a U-boat, I was always glad to get back to port. Of all the ports I have been

in, I liked St. John's [sic]. I liked to walk down Water Street to the wet canteen or a bar to have a glass of screech or a slug of Block & Tackle. Take a drink of Block & Tackle, walk a block, and you would tackle anything. The people of St. John's [sic] were the greatest, and the Sally Ann, no matter where you were, was the best. St. John's [sic] was a real busy port. We would only be there long enough to fuel up and take on supplies. Then it was off to sea again. In harbour, each ship had to supply two guys for shore patrol (naval police) to try and keep the boys out of trouble. I was shore patrol in many ports. Another job in port for the helmsman was quartermaster on the gangway to check people coming aboard. As well, he had to record barometer readings every hour. He also had to keep proper tension on the lines that tied the ship to the jetty. He had to keep proper tension when the tide was going out and coming in.



Ice formed on deck from ocean spray

Bedford Basin in Halifax would have hundreds of ships ready to form a convoy. At dusk, the basin would be full and, by morning, the ships would all be gone. We would also be gone trying to keep the U-boats away from the freighters. That kept the Navy busy because the U-boats were everywhere. Halfway across the Atlantic was known as the Black Pit - too far for the bombers to fly out from Iceland, and the U-boats waited there in wolf packs. Many freighters and Navy ships were torpedoed there. The Atlantic was an unforgiving sea for our small fighting ships. The ocean spray froze and coated ships with ice. It had to be chipped off so our ship would not become unstable and maybe roll over. Many hours I have spent chipping ice with my whole crew, officers and all, at the same time, with the threat of a U-boat attack. Our clothes would be wet, and we would be soaked to the skin. We would have icicles hanging from our eyebrows, nose, and chin. We would not break them off till we got below with a little heat. Some skin would come off also.

Some time late in 1943 or early 1944, the U-boats came out with a fearsome new torpedo. The acoustic torpedo called a Gnat that they did not have to aim. They fired it, and it honed in on the sound of a ship's propeller. My ship, HMCS *Annapolis*, pulled a few thousand feet behind the ship iron bars that made more noise and turbulence than our propellers. I have heard other Navy guys say it worked fairly well.

HMCS *Annapolis* back in Halifax, myself and several other sailors were drafted off to the land-based ship HMCS *Peregrine* in Halifax. I served eight months on the triangle run aboard HMCS *Annapolis*. Six of us Able Seamen drafted off HMCS *Annapolis* were to be sent to HMCS *Naden* on Vancouver Island. However, someone made a big goof at the HMCS *Peregrine* office, and we were sent to HMCS *Avalon* in St. John's [sic], Newfoundland, by train in the middle of winter. We had to change trains in Truro, Nova Scotia, and travel to North Sydney, Cape Breton Island. When we got to North Sydney, the harbour was frozen over, and we had to wait for an ice-breaker so the ferry could come in and dock, which took a couple of days. We finally set sail and landed at Port Aux Basques, Newfoundland. We found the train station, but there was nothing there but two passenger cars. We were told the engine was snowbound somewhere up around Corner Brook.

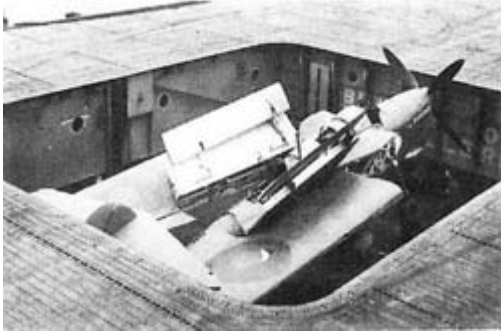
The car had wooden seats and a big pot-belly stove in the corner with a wood pile outside. We got the stove fired up so we were warm. There was no dining car. It didn't matter anyway since we ran out of meal tickets on the ferry. We spent an awful night huddled around the stove or trying to sleep on the hard wooden seats. In the morning, an old guy came along and took us into town to the Sally Ann (Salvation Army) where we were given something to eat. It was just a small Sally Ann, so they made arrangements for us to sleep at the local jail. The jail was a large round place with cells all around the outside. We were welcome to sleep there but had to keep the fire going in the centre. For the next couple of days, we ate at the Sally Ann and slept in the jail. You could not beat the Sally Ann. No matter where you went, they were the best. The train engine arrived, and we were on our way. When people were standing on the side of the tracks, the train would stop and they would get on. Then it would stop to let someone off. The train did this many times, but we did get to St. John's [sic]. I can now say I have travelled all the way across Newfoundland on the Bullet.

At the land-based ship HMCS *Avalon*, the six of us were given different jobs to do around the navy yards. One of our guys was a signalman, and he was given a job in the Admiralty. One of his jobs was to take messages and put them on the Admiral's desk. Being 'old salts' of the sea, we were not very happy with barracks life. So sitting in the wet canteen that night, having a bottle of Moosehead or Ten Penny, the idea came into our heads that the signalman should put a phony message on the Admiral's desk. It read, 'AB Mitchell, AB?, AB?, etc., etc., should board the first ferry going to Halifax. With a great deal of commotion, we were rounded up and, with all of our gear, loaded in the back of a truck going really fast to Argentina to board the Lady Rodney. The ferry was held up waiting for our arrival. As soon as we threw our kit bags and hammocks on board, the Lady Rodney set sail for Halifax.



HMS *Puncher*

At HMCS *Peregrin*, Halifax, we had to get the Padre to get us out of trouble, and prove that the trip to St. John's [sic] was not our doing. After all these years, I'm sure the Navy has no idea how we got back. Within a few hours, we were on a train travelling across Canada to HMCS *Naden* on Vancouver Island to pick up a brand new aircraft carrier of the home fleet. HMS *Puncher* was commissioned for the Royal Navy of England and was manned by 850 Canadians. Most of the crew were young boys 17 or 18 years old who had never been to sea before. They were like me when I first saw the ocean. I put my finger in the water and tasted it - yes, it is salt water. I became friends with fellows my age from all across Canada, and the friendships have lasted still. They were truly a great bunch of guys who did their duty, often against great odds.



Barracuda being moved between decks

When I first arrived at HMS *Puncher*, I went up the gangway, saluted the Quarter deck, gave the duty officer my name and number, and was assigned a mess with the flight deck party. I was amazed at the size of HMS *Puncher*. It was a lot bigger than the destroyer I was on. The upper deck is the flight deck running the length and breadth of the ship. Two large squares in the flight deck are elevators where planes can be taken from one deck to another. Below the flight deck is the hangar deck, the same size as the flight deck, where the planes are stored and repaired in a closed-in area. The decks below have everything you would find in a large city - a hospital, dental clinic, galley, cafeteria, machine shops, laundry, and messes for over 1000 crew.



Anti-aircraft guns (Oerlikons) being fired

HMS *Puncher* had armament to deal with enemy planes and surface craft. On the bow, we had two 40-millimeter twin Bofors. On each side of the ship, the flight deck was lined with 20 millimeter Oerlikons. On the stern, there were two twin Bofors and two large 5-inch cannons. Every 10th shell was a tracer shell with warheads that exploded when they hit. We left Canada sailing south along the west coast of the USA and Mexico with several escort ships, destroyers, etc., because the USA was at war with Japan, and there was always the danger of a Jap U-boat attack. We would not see Canada again until after victory.



Loading Motor Launch at New Orleans

Our paths of duty called us into the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic Oceans. We left the Pacific through the Panama Canal across the Caribbean Sea, across the Gulf of Mexico. Then we sailed ninety miles up the Mississippi River to New Orleans. At New Orleans, we picked up four high-speed fighting launches for the invasion of Europe. They had floated down the river on barges. Only a ship with a flight deck could take them away. We sailed up the east coast of the USA. Then we went through the boom defense into Norfolk, Virginia, to take on more fighting equipment. All the time, since we left Vancouver, I was taking special flight deck training with an older aircraft. How fast we could fold the wings, get it across the barriers, down the elevators to the hangar deck, how fast back up to the flight deck, spread the wings, and arrange for take off. The flight deck party got really good at this. I was also taking training for the crash barriers which I will explain more when we get into enemy action.



Black Widows loaded on deck

Arriving at New York, we tied up at a pier at Staten Island. At once, our motor launches were taken off, and big cranes started loading Black Widow twin tail fighter planes in our hangar deck and flight deck as well as all kinds of supplies. Our ship was loaded with the latest night fighters developed by the USA Air Force - the first Black Widows to ever see Europe. We carried the pilots and maintenance crew who were able, immediately on landing in Casablanca, Africa, to fly the Black Widows to Advance station for the invasion of Southern France. HMS *Puncher* racing out of a USA port with one of the most valuable convoys to the Mediterranean. On our return trip to get another load of planes, we picked up a new broadcast that the invasion of Southern France was on. Aircraft carriers have proven to be the most valuable investment made by the Navy. In action, they can be ready in short order if needed for a quick ferrying job. The whole world has been amazed at the number of planes that the RAF and RCAF with the USA Air Force was able to put in the skies over Germany. Loaded with hangar full and flight deck covered with planes lashed within inches of each other, it was HMS *Puncher* that brought a record load across the Atlantic without damage to a single plane.



Thunderbolts on Puncher's flight deck

On many raids, *Puncher* carried a mighty punch to the enemy for the RAF, the fleet air arm and the USA Air Force. While our planes were being unloaded in Casablanca, Africa, the USA Army air transport base for whom HMS *Puncher* had brought a load of planes, expressed their thanks with trucks to carry an excursion party of off-duty men 140 miles into the interior to the capital of Morocco to the Sultan's Palace at Rabat. In the Sultan's gardens we were served a royal lunch, and for me, a Strathroy kid, it was unbelievable. From Casablanca we were ordered back to Norfolk, Virginia. This is the widest part of the Atlantic Ocean. We passed close to the Canaries, the Azores, and Bermuda. Often times, our escorts were dropping depth charges. With our flight deck empty and no planes, we sailed in the warm Gulf Stream. The flight deck became a playing field for games. Deck hockey and other games were played. Also, my part ship was still taking training on the flight deck for when we would go into action with our own squadron. Back from Africa, we were quickly loaded again at Norfolk, Virginia, this time with Thunderbolt fighting planes. We were ordered to the British Isles via New York. With our hangar deck and flight deck loaded with planes tied inches apart, we would have over 150 planes on board. Sailing out of New York, we were joined with ships from Australia for convoy to the UK.

All the time at sea, constant watch is kept at all action stations - ready in case of enemy action. Even with our escort Corvettes, Frigates, and Destroyers on constant patrol, not all the ships made it to the other side. Some of the freighters would be torpedoed and sunk. With every inch of our decks loaded with planes for use in the war against Germany, we made a speedy turn around at New York and headed for England. Next we sailed the Irish Sea with orders to sail up the Mersey to Liverpool where our planes were unloaded. We sailed to Belfast where we picked up a squadron of planes for passage to Scotland and took them to Glasgow. After unloading in Glasgow our ship underwent a boiler clean, and we were given five days leave with free railway passes anywhere in the British Isles.

We used the trains for our bedrooms at night. It didn't matter where the train was going, we got on one of those separate compartments. We found out in the morning where we were. Every time we went into a bar with Canada on our sleeves, someone always paid for a drink for us. Also, when we sounded different some of the locals in out of the way places were surprised we spoke English. I got back to Glasgow a day or so before HMS *Puncher* was to sail. While standing at Sockyhall and Renfrew in the pouring rain, a Scotch lassie took pity on me and took me home where I met her father and mother, brothers and sisters. I was served a hot cup of tea and a bun. Their place was a large room with a fireplace. Along each wall was a hole with a curtain where the beds were. I was shown a bed for the night. With a short ladder, I got in and pulled the curtain. In a little while, a knock came and asked me if I was decent. I said I was so she peeked in and said she would knock me up in the morning and take me to the tram back to my ship which she did. I never got back there again. Those people did not have much, but they sure liked us Canadians.

Back at HMS *Puncher*, we were told our sister ship was torpedoed off Norway. It was the HMS *Nabob*, the other carrier that was manned by Canadians. We would now engage in deck landing training, and our ferrying jobs were over. For the rest of the war, my home base was Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands north of Scotland. Before we left Glasgow, we took on up to several hundred Fleet Air Arm personnel. All kinds of aircraft parts, depth charges, mines, torpedoes, airplane gasoline, etc., etc. We set sail, and before we got to Scapa Flow, our squadron of 10 or more flew on, and all landed in good order. It sure

showed our flight deck training paid off. My party handled them without a single mishap. HMS *Puncher* was now in full operation with the Home Fleet, with duty of striking force on German held ports along the coast of Norway. Spotting and destroying enemy ships and convoys and depth charging U-boats as well as convoy duty on the Russian Murmansk run. From our flight deck we flew Barracudas, Avengers, Fireflies, and Wildcats. Our Barracudas were the largest - they could carry torpedoes, mines, and depth charges. Avengers and Fireflies both carried bombs. Our Wildcats were our fighting planes to take care of enemy planes and bombers that attacked from shore. All aircraft had machine guns in their wings. Also we had a Wildcat stationed on our catapult ready for action when our planes were away on a raid.



Rocket assisted Barracuda takeoff

At all times at sea, we were flanked by cruisers, destroyers, corvettes, etc., to keep vigil for anything above the water as well as below. HMS *Puncher* was the first carrier of the Royal Navy to develop successful use of rockets to aid in the takeoff of our Barracudas so they could carry heavier bomb loads. We had two rockets on each side of the plane and just before the plane left the flight deck, the pilot fired the rockets that gave the plane a lift for a stronger lift on take off. This was a real success. Our ship could take a torpedo hit and that part of the ship could be sealed off. It would flood, but we could still float if the hit was not in a bad place. In these waters, our sister ship HMS *Nabob* was torpedoed, the aft compartment was flooded and sealed off. She made it back to Scapa Flow at a slow three knots with the bow high in the air and the stem 14 feet under water. Several carriers would go on a raid together. One strike off Norway, a sister carrier that got torpedoed within sight of HMS *Puncher* got back to port. The quick alert of our anti-submarine planes from *Puncher* saved our sister ship from further attack. When we reached the area where our planes were to leave the ship, HMS *Puncher* would go full speed into the wind to allow for better takeoff.



Safely on deck with damaged wing

In one of the strikes off Norway, eleven Barracudas took off from *Puncher's* flight deck in the speedy time of one minute and 23 seconds - an average of less than 8 seconds per machine. Seconds are precious for an aircraft carrier during a raid. Slow handling of returning planes can make a carrier an almost perfect

target for lurking U-boats or enemy planes. The necessity for even one plane being waved away because the preceding plane hasn't been handled correctly could quite easily mean the difference between the carrier returning to harbour or being just another ship gone down. My part ship, the flight deck party, was really good, and only a few times a plane got waxed away. The most important man in our party was Lieutenant Josh Tucker of the Royal New Zealand Navy Volunteer Reserves. He was the deck landing control officer. He was the batsman. He was solely responsible for the landing of all aircraft. The pilot did not look at the ship or the deck. He would watch the batsman. Failure to do so would often result in a crash. But when they kept their eyes on Josh, there was no trouble. It is no easy job landing on a small carrier with the deck rolling from port to starboard and the deck going up and down as much as 15 ft.



Planes arranged within inches of each other

When our planes came back from a strike, they would be shot full of holes with the end of the wings missing and ailerons dragging. Sometimes all the planes did not come back. They were either shot down or shot up so they had to be ditched in the ocean. That was the worst part. Real heroes, these guys were gone forever. The flight deck party were at their stations for every plane to take off and land. When as many as 20 planes were 'ranged' on the flight deck ready to go on a raid, each wheel had to be chalked so the plane could not move. Space was scarce on a small carrier. Planes were ranged within inches of each other. One plane moving a few inches would mean several planes would be damaged. My party laid on the deck and held each chalk in place. It was not an easy job with 20 propellers spinning and the ship going full speed in the wind. I usually had the lead plane so I could get to my barrier. When the batsman pointed at you and waved out chinks, you took the chinks out, put them over your head, rolled across the deck and fell into a catwalk on the side of the ship. It was a real 'no-no' to sit up. With all the wind, you would be blown into whirling propellers. Then damage control would hose you over the side into the ocean.

When the planes came back from a raid to land, within a few seconds of each other, they would be low on fuel and some badly damaged. I would be at my action station, the crash barriers. When a plane came in on the moving deck, the pilot would lower a hook on the tail of the plane. When he got the signal to cut engine from the batsman, he would lower the tail to hook a wire across the deck and that was all the brakes he had. The wire was hydraulic with some give, but it would stop the plane in short order. The pilots got really good at this, but sometimes they would miss or the hook would bounce back up or would break. That is when they would fly into my barriers. When a plane was going to fly into my barriers, they would be coming fast - still flying. My job was to stop them. I could not let them go any farther. My division would be ahead of my barriers, parking and folding wings. Not to stop or catch a plane, they would fly into the parked planes and my division with a terrible loss of life. I never let a plane go through or hurt a pilot. When a plane was about to fly into my barrier, I had to duck down the side of the flight deck because the propellers were made of wood, and the flying pieces would whistle over my head with such force that they would go right through you if you were hit. It is tricky enough to land on a small carrier in daytime, but we did night flying. HMS *Puncher* became the carrier of the only night bomber squadron attached to the home fleet. It takes the finest skill to fly off and land on a moving flight deck in total darkness. We did have a few more night barrier crashes.



Batsman guiding an incoming plane

No ship would have the smallest light showing at sea. The batsman had flashlights with extended plastic ends so the pilots could see. All I had was the fire coming out of the exhaust at the side of the engines. When the sparks flew, I knew they had caught a wire, and when I heard a thud, I knew they were down and stopped. When I was sure they were stopped, I put my barrier down and let the plane pass over then quickly put it up as the next plane was coming in. A plane one night slid sideways along my barrier wire and, when it stopped, I had hot oil dripping on my clothes. Damage control was on the flight deck for every plane to land. They had a man in a thick asbestos suit to get the air crew out of the planes when they flew into the barriers. Lt. Commander Paul Godfrey was the officer in charge of everything to do with flying. At a crash, he would put his thumb up which meant get it in front of the barriers if it was worth saving. If he put his thumb down, it was shoved over the side. All this had to be done fast because we were in dangerous waters, and more planes had to land. Captain Roger E.S. Bidwell, HMS *Puncher*, served as night fighter and night bomber carrier of the home fleet in operations off Norway and in the Arctic Ocean.

On some of these raids, there would be several carriers with escorts of cruisers and destroyers. HMS *Puncher* would be protective cover for the entire force of many ships that depended on HMS *Puncher*. Then we would sense the important role our ship was playing in this theatre against Nazi Germany. On some of these larger raids with several carriers, Rear Admiral Phoderick McGregor would sail on HMS *Puncher*. He sure was a fighting Admiral against Nazi Germany. One morning before daybreak, as we sailed outside the Boom defence of Scapa Flow, we were sailing under the flag of "Hit'em Again McGregor." The fleet steamed at full speed for the Arctic. We now knew that our ship was on the way off the northern tip of Norway, far inside the Arctic circle, from which point our planes would raid the German submarine base near Narvik. Our planes maintained a constant air patrol in order to ensure that no enemy eye discovered our position or direction as well as watching out for a convoy for the Russians on the Murmansk run. The raid was a good success. As far as I know, most of the ships arrived back at Scapa Flow.

At times when our planes were doing protective cover, a member of the flight deck party would go flying. On more than one occasion, I found myself several thousand feet in the air as an observer in a Barracuda watching out for a U-boat or enemy planes. Looking down, *Puncher* looked like a broken tooth pick bouncing around in the waves. On landing, I just hoped that guy on my barrier knew what he was doing. You sure needed your safety harness on when the hook caught a wire - that flying plane came to a stop pretty fast.

When we were anchored out in the middle of Scapa Flow, we always had jobs to do. One of my jobs with two or three of my shipmates was to rig the derrick to bring on supplies. The derrick, when not in use, lay flat in the catwalk beside the flight deck so it would not interfere with landing planes, sometimes bringing on goodies for the officers' mess that the sailors' messes never saw. A case of jam, bread, or cookies would end up in the winch room where my friends and I would have lots of unscheduled lunches (darling little angels we were). Other times, we would be working in a room under the flight deck - splicing cables

to hook Wildcats on the catapult. Every time a plane took off from the catapult, the strap would fly into the ocean. We came up with an idea to save straps. We showed our plan to Commander Godfrey. He said it was worth a try. It worked 100%. I don't think we lost another strap. While anchored inside the boom defense, at Scapa Flow, I always had a feeling of being quite safe.

Also in the harbour were large battleships, etc. - the destroyer HMCS *Huron*, HMS *Anson*, *Rodney*, *Berwick*, *Norfolk* and a new fleet carrier, just to name a few of our neighbours and lots of other ships coming and going. HMS *Puncher* spent most of the time on the open sea giving a hard punch to any enemy it might encounter. Up in the northern waters, it was cold, and we would be on the flight deck for long hours at a time. The duty cook would come along with a pail of kia (hot chocolate) and, if we missed meal time, would give us a couple of hard tack biscuits - and they were hard. I always figured if we put them in our guns and fired them at the enemy, they would do more good.

The Royal Navy always kept every fighting ship at top efficiency, and all ships followed a schedule for returning to a base for overhaul. In late April 1945, HMS *Puncher* was ordered to Glasgow for dry-dock routine maintenance. This meant we would get five days leave. We sailed from Scapa Flow with a proud record of having shared in the operations protecting the convoy lanes with supplies to Russia. Over a million and a quarter tons of cargo had been carried to Russia over the route through the Arctic Circle in the past year. Altogether, the home fleet in the past year alone had sunk 28 enemy ships and left 57 burning, beached or damaged. Fifty-five enemy aircraft were destroyed and 31 probably destroyed. At least five enemy submarines had been sunk and eight possibly sunk or damaged. Also, with our striking forces, many German held harbours along the coast of Norway were severely damaged. We lost four of the escort ships and at least nine of our merchant ships.

With the *Puncher* now in dry-dock in Glasgow, the crew was given five days leave. Myself and my friends went to London. London was still being bombed. All hours of the day and night, air-raid sirens would scream. You could hear Buzz bombs coming, but when their motors stopped, they came straight down and, when they hit, there was a terrible explosion. Thousands and thousands of people lived and slept in the Tubes (subway) under the city - whole families, babies and all. You had to be careful where you stepped so you would not step on someone. They were down there away from the bombs, and most of their homes were gone. London took a terrible beating. In the early part of May 1945, I was in London, England, and had the thrill of a lifetime. Germany and Europe had laid down their arms. On VE Day, I was at Nelson's Monument in Trafalgar Square, London, England. What a celebration - people were cheering, some were standing numb, some were hugging, tears coming down their faces and people crying. The war was over.

However, it was necessary for the Department of National Defense to point out that many of their U-boats had not yet been accounted for, and the Navy had to continue operating in the Atlantic at full war strength until all U-boats were accounted for. Over seventy percent of HMS *Puncher* crew volunteered to serve in the Pacific Theatre against Japan. Captain Bidwell had received notice of his coming appointment to a new fleet carrier HMCS *Magnificent*, and he said all *Puncher* volunteers were going with him. Myself and most of the flight deck party volunteered. The Royal Canadian Navy would be joining in full strength with the Royal Navy and the USA Navy in the final crushing of the Japanese war. In the meantime, HMS *Puncher* was ordered to the Irish Sea to train a new squadron of Fireflies for the Far East. Our Barracuda squadron was suitable for fighting in the Arctic, but not the tropics. We found ourselves training Fireflies off the Isle of Man. We made our anchorage between exercises off Douglas, Isle of Man, and later off Bangor, Ireland. The unexpected surrender of Japan in August 1945, changed everything. We sailed back to Glasgow where bunks from the Naval base at HMCS *Niobe* were welded to the steel deck in our hangar deck. We were now a troop ship.



Clarence Mitchell on Puncher deck

Sailing across the Atlantic with all the ship's running lights on, for the first time since I joined the navy, sure made my day. We arrived in Halifax July 3, 1945 - HMS *Puncher*, back from action in the Atlantic, the North Sea, and far northern waters with the British home fleet. We docked for the first visit to a Canadian port in over a year - the largest ship manned by the Royal Canadian Navy ever to enter Halifax harbour. The decks were lined with thousands of personnel in addition to our own crew as every possible space had been utilized to return personnel from the navy, army, and air force. HMS *Puncher* aided in the earlier demobilization of thousands of troops back to Canada until 1946 when the ship was decommissioned. I served on HMS *Puncher* just short of a year and a half, from the time it was built till after the end of the war. Then I was drafted off to the naval barracks HMCS *Peregrine* in Halifax where I was given a quick medical and drafted to HMCS *Prevost* London with a stopover in Strathroy for some added leave I was due. I arrived home September 20, 1945. The home-coming parade was formed up on Frank Street in front of the Town Hall. I was standing watching the parade when the Mayor of Strathroy who was Walter Bolton, my grandmother's brother, got me in the parade. We marched to Alexander Park, and each veteran was given a ring. I still, after over sixty years, have mine.



*Clarence Mitchell back in Strathroy
just before discharge*

As the war was many years ago, WWII veterans are passing away in large numbers. Before we are all gone, we must let it be known what the veterans did so future generations will know. The real heroes of the Battle of the Atlantic were the merchant seamen who pushed themselves to the limit through one dangerous passage after another.

I write this with no honour or glory to myself but for the hundreds of thousands who fought and died for the freedom of Canada. We Canadians live in the best country in the whole world. Arriving at HMCS Prevost, London, Ontario, I was discharged from the navy on November 6, 1945.

NOTE OF INTEREST: My pay was \$1.30 a day. All the time I was in enemy-occupied waters, I got 25 cents a day danger money. I signed half of my pay home to my mother.

From the notes of Clarence Mitchell, written between Dec. 2005 to Mar. 2006

Clarence Mitchell was born on June 18, 1924 on a farm near Cairngorm, Ontario

He enlisted at HMCS Prevost / London, Ontario on June 29, 1942

He was discharged at HMCS Prevost / London Ontario on Nov. 6, 1945

Transposed and edited by Vaughan and Carol MacPherson, Mar - May, 2006

Clarence Mitchell is a member of the Sir Arthur Currie Legion Branch 116 Strathroy