

REMEMBRANCE OF A MOUNTAIN VETERAN

We all know how difficult it can be to get war veterans to talk about themselves and understandably so. As a former mountain secondary school administrator and naval reservist I was often called upon to organize school Remembrance Day programs.

I realized that while it was easy for a veteran to spin a tale over a relaxing glass of ale in a legion hall, it was an entirely different scenario to ask a veteran to give a formal address to an assembly of restless teenagers.

Then I came up with a creative solution. Why couldn't I act like a TV Late Night Show host guiding the guest veteran through his story based on questions I would ask related to projected personal pictures of his war experiences. It worked like a charm and I have to admit that in all my years of teaching I have never had more attentive audiences.

All the veterans that I interviewed are now deceased, but I collected their stories and I would like to share this one with you for Remembrance Day.



Alex Tennant (1918-2002) lived most of his married life on the central mountain. But as a young man in 1940 he was serving as a carpenter's apprentice when he joined the navy at Hamilton's naval recruiting base, HMCS STAR. Shown here in his new uniform he is standing beside his father's Plymouth automobile. Note the cocky, rakish tilt to his cap so typical of youth. Like many new recruits it would not be long before he grew a beard to look like an old salt. When I told his story to a women's senior club and projected this picture, one of the ladies let out a shriek and began to giggle. She explained that Alex was one of her old boyfriends. Oh yes, Alex was a typical sailor!

With all his training completed by March 1943, Alex joined the destroyer, HMCS Iroquois in Halifax. The ship was assigned to escort Gibraltar convoys for the invasion of Sicily and Italy. The Mediterranean was a dangerous theatre of war because convoys were always in range of land based enemy planes and naval forces. Iroquois rescued 628 survivors from a torpedoed troop ship and Alex got to witness the terrible bombing devastation on the island of Malta.

In the winter of 1943, Alex and his ship were transferred from the subtropics to the frigid extremes of the arctic on the Murmansk Run to northern Russia. This route added additional threats to the convoys with terrible weather and enemy battleships hiding in Norwegian fiords. Alex was a signalman working in the radio room of HMCS Iroquois, decoding message traffic. On Christmas 1943, the German battle cruiser, Scharnhorst, came out of her fiord hiding place to attack the convoy that Iroquois was helping to protect. As the duty signalman, Alex received the first radio warning of the approach of this powerful warship. He said he was never so scared in his life and fully expected momentarily to be blown to bits or die of hypothermia in the frigid arctic ocean.

However, the Tribal Class escort destroyers made a daring torpedo attack in the dark and the Scharnhorst turned away, falling into the grasp of a shadowing British Task Force and was sunk. Only 36 sailors survived out of a crew of 1,200.



Alex shows his 1945 Murmansk Medal presented to Canadian naval veterans by the Soviet government in 1988.

Mountain Memories, is submitted by historian Robert Williamson for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society and appears monthly in the Mountain News.