

Archives & Collections Society

George Devonshire

George Devonshire's love of the water began when he joined the Sea Cadets as a young boy in Toronto. After leaving home without his parents' permission to satisfy his teenage need for excitement and adventure, George took up an offer to be a galley boy in the merchant navy, serving on the Danish ship MV *Asbjorn*. At this time, the Germans occupied Denmark, and the *Asbjorn* was under charter to the Canadian government. One night, while George was in a convoy headed to Londonderry carrying 500 tons of TNT and 250 tons of picrate, three of the other merchant ships were torpedoed. George wrote about the attack in his diary the next morning on Monday, August 3, 1942:

When I stepped out on deck I was amazed at the sight. It looked like a real expensive 24th of May exhibition. Snowflake and star shells littered the sky. The convoy was already under attack. It was an eerie sight to see the black forms of ships when there was a rocket in the sky.



George at *The Victory* in 2010.

George then joined the Royal Canadian Naval Reserves, believing it to be safer than the merchant navy, and began active service with the Royal Canadian Navy in January of 1943. He eventually became a Seaman Torpedoman, because he "wanted to be more than just a sailor," onboard HMCS *Waskesiu*, the first Canadian designed frigate. As a Torpedoman, George began working on depth charges, where, in preparation for an attack, he would receive orders to set the hydrostatic pistols for the charges to explode at different depths. George recalls in his memoirs, "I liked the job because it was exciting to be actually making the underwater booming noises, instead of just listening, as was the case in *Asbjorn* the previous year." Later George was assigned No.1 on the Hedgehog, a spigot mortar with projectiles that were fired all at once, hitting the water ahead of the ship in a wide pattern. During late 1943 and early 1944, while *Waskesiu* was part of a blockade-runner patrol northwest of Spain, George watched in horror as a torpedo struck HMS *Tweed*, a river class frigate:



George receiving a medal for his service.

She sunk in a few minutes. There was no warning and we were not at action stations. A little later, the submarine periscope was briefly sighted. [HMS] *Nene* started to rescue survivors while we screened the area and continued the asdic sweep. We gained contact and carried out two depth charge attacks. The bad part was that one of our attacks was fairly near the survivors, many of whom were floating in their life jackets. It took me a while to get over that scene. I remember anguishing over why we always seemed to lose. Were we losing the war too?

But the real highlight for George while working on the *Hedgehog* was on the night of February 24, 1944 when *Waskesiu* destroyed *U-257*. The German submarine was about to attack a convoy when *Waskesiu* gained Asdic contact. *Waskesiu* attacked with the *Hedgehog* first, which proved to be ineffective, so the crew proceeded with two attacks using depth charges. The depth charges damaged the submarine, forcing it to the surface before it sank under the Atlantic waves for the last time. *Waskesiu* picked up four survivors from *U-257* and *Nene* rescued another ten. The German prisoners were given blankets and warm food, in a manner that one lieutenant described as “nearly comradely,” before being taken to Londonderry, Ireland.

After the war, George came into contact with Waldemar Nickel, one of the German lieutenants captured from *U-257*. The correspondence between them over the events of that night grew into a lasting friendship that George feels is illustrative of the “stupidity of war.” The crew of *Waskesiu* felt united by the destruction of *U-257* and has had a couple of reunions, one in *Waskesiu*, Saskatchewan, and another at George’s own house in Prinyer Cove, where Waldemar was the guest of honour.

Waskesiu was also part of a convoy traveling to the Soviet Union in 1944 for the Arctic Campaign.

During this trip, three merchant vessels were lost and submarines continually harassed them as they traveled up the coast of Norway. George remembers the hostile atmosphere in the Soviet Union when the convoy delivered their supplies. Forty years later, George joined the North Russia Club established for veterans of the Arctic Campaign. Through this association, he was able to revisit Russia in 1995. George recognized some of the locations he traveled to during the war, and this time found the Russian people more welcoming, commenting that they “laid out the whole town for us.”



September, 1944. George is marked with the red dot.

During the Normandy invasion, *Waskesiu* was positioned on the western approaches to the English Channel to prevent submarine entry during the Normandy invasion; George remembers that “It was an easy job. We enjoyed the fine weather.”

George left the navy at the end of the war, achieving four medals for his service. When asked about his best memory of his war years, George jokingly replies “girls!” More earnestly, George goes on to describe the fun he had ashore with his crewmembers and friends. He thoroughly enjoyed St. John’s, Newfoundland, relating how “the people there were fantastic.” He liked coming through a slot in the cliffs to a calm harbour where the lights were on; in Europe no harbour could have its lights on.

George also has fond memories from the other side of the ocean. Coming from the North Atlantic to Londonderry, even in December, he remembers that the grass came right down to the sea: “it’s like going to the springtime.”

The Navy also led George to something more tangible than fond memories. Early training brought him to Quebec City, where he met his future wife, Phyllis: “It was love at first sight. We were married after the war and 44 years later, we can look back on a happy, busy and eventful life.”

Reflecting on his contribution to the Second World War, George, smiling, has one word to describe how he feels: “good.”

Nathalie Anderson, Assistant Curator, 2010



The first frigate completed on the west coast, HMCS *Waskesiu* K330 was commissioned at Victoria on June 16, 1943, and left for Halifax on July 8. She worked up in Bermuda the following month, returning to Halifax on September 11, and late in October left for Londonderry to join EG 5, renumbered EG 6 on November 21. *Waskesiu* served chiefly in UK waters, but early in 1944 supported Gibraltar and Sierra Leone convoys. On February 24, while escort to SC.153, she sank *U 257*, and in April made a trip to North Russia to bring back convoy RA.59. She was present on D-Day. On September 14 she left ‘Derry with ONF.253 for Canada, and soon after arriving began an extensive refit at Shelburne. On its completion in March, 1945, she proceeded to Bermuda to work up, following which she sailed for Londonderry via Horta. She left ‘Derry for Canada late in May, proceeding to Esquimalt in June to commence tropicalization refit, but work was suspended in August and she was paid off into reserve on January 29, 1946. She was sold to the Indian government in 1947 for conversion to a pilot vessel, and renamed *Hooghly* in 1950.