



VIMM

DISPATCHES

Come See, Come Learn, Come Experience History



Spring 2018

Vancouver Island Military Museum

★ *75th Anniversary* ★

D Day, June 6, 1944, and the Battle of Normandy

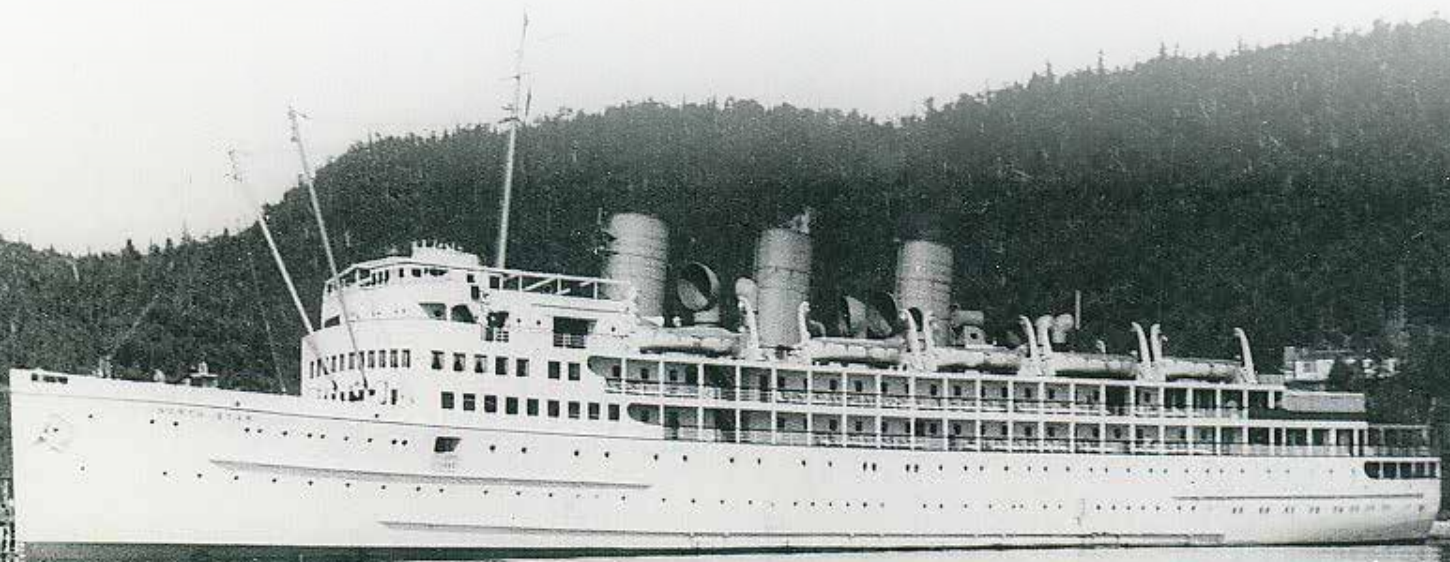
HMCS PRINCE HENRY

Canadian Landing Ship

By Greg Devenish, Museum Volunteer

As we remember the 75th anniversary of D-Day, 1944, there was a connection with the coast of B.C. *HMCS Prince Henry* was an armed merchant cruiser and a landing ship which saw action at Normandy, in Southern France, and Greece in WWII. The ship had a long and distinguished career, both as a civilian vessel and a military ship, which began in 1930 and ended in 1962. *HMCS Prince Henry* had a connection to Nanaimo and the coast of British Columbia in her early years and later would disembark the Canadian Scottish Regiment of Canada (Vancouver Island's infantry regiment) on June 6, 1944.

S.S. *Prince Henry* was built by Cammell Laird in Birkenhead, England, 1930, for Canadian National Steamship Lines. The ship had a displacement of 6, 893 tons, was 366 feet in length, could attain over 20 knots, and carry 334 passengers. At the time S.S. *Prince Henry* was considered a mid-size luxury liner and the port of registry was Vancouver. Upon completion she made regular trips up and down the west coast of British Columbia.



SS Prince Henry (Canadian National Steamship Lines-1935)

(Continued on page 4)

New Dambusters Display

By Brian McFadden, VIMM Vice President

We have two new exhibits in the Bomber Command display. They tell the amazing story of the *Dambusters Raid* code named "Chastise". Nanaimo born Pilot Officer, John Fraser was one of five airmen from British Columbia who participated in the raid.

The story of the attack on the hydro electric dams in Germany's Ruhr Valley during World War Two is one in which Canadian airmen played a significant role. The plan was to attack the Möhne, Eder, and Sorpe dams, deep in the industrial heartland of the Third Reich. It was an audacious plan which called for a special weapon and highly trained, experienced aircrews to carry out the raid. British inventor Barnes Wallis created a *bouncing bomb* which he believed would accomplish the task.

In March 1943, the RAF formed 617 Squadron under the command of Wing Commander Guy Gibson. It was special squadron of Lancaster Bombers modified for the sole purpose of attacking the three major dams of the Ruhr Valley. Gibson was given the task of selecting the squadron personnel, and the air crews chosen for the raid were hand-picked men from British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand squadrons and were considered the best and most experienced crews in Bomber Command.

On August 16th, 1943, nineteen Lancaster Bombers left Scranton, England; three were forced to abort leaving sixteen to carry out the raid. The Mohen and Eder dams were breached and the Sorpe damaged. The raid was considered a huge success, however the casualties sustained by the aircrews were substantial. Eight aircraft representing 50% of the attacking force were destroyed, 53 airmen lost their lives, and the three who survived became prisoners of war.

Canadians played a major role in all aspects of Bomber Command during World War II especially in the *Dambusters Raid*. Two of the aircraft lost in the raid were flown by Canadian airmen and, of the 133 aircrew who participated in the raids, 30 were Canadians. Fifteen Canadians did not return, 14 were killed, and the one survivor, P/O John Fraser from Nanaimo, became a prisoner of war,

Fraser joined the RCAF in 1941 and trained as a bomb-aimer. He had completed a tour of 30 operations with Bomber Command No. 50 Squadron prior to being selected to join 617 Squadron and was part of the crew on the Lancaster Bomber AJ-M (Mother) piloted by John Hoppood.

THE DAMBUSTERS
Operation Chastise

Prior to World War II, the British Air Ministry had identified Germany's heavy industrialized Ruhr Valley and its huge hydro-electric Dams as important strategic targets. To bomb the dams required an exceptional degree of accuracy and a new kind of weapon. British inventor Barnes Wallis set to work to create a bomb that would be able to accomplish such a task. After many experiments, Wallis believed he had found the answer by creating a special "bouncing Bomb".

In March 1943, the RAF formed 617 Squadron under the command of Wing Commander Guy Gibson. This would be a special squadron of Lancaster Bombers modified for the sole purpose of attacking the three major dams of the Ruhr Valley. Gibson was given the task of selecting the squadron personnel, and the air crews chosen for the raid were hand-picked men from British, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand squadrons who were considered the best and most experienced crews in Bomber Command.

THE PLAN
On May 16/17, 1943, nineteen aircraft would attack the Mohen, Eder, and Sorpe dams at a time when the water level would be at their highest. The entire operation would be carried out under the cover of darkness to avoid the German night anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. The bombers would leave in three groups from Scampton, England, late on the evening of the 16th.

THE BOUNCING BOMB
The bomb code named "Upkeep" weighed 9500 lbs and resembled a huge oil drum or depth charge. Each bomber at ten minute intervals would begin the bomb run three miles from the target. With the dam breached millions of tons of water would cascade down the Ruhr Valley destroying everything in its path.

THE RAID
Due to enemy action or mischance 3 aircraft had to abort leaving just 16 to carry out the raid. Eight aircraft representing 50% of the attacking force were destroyed, fifty-three airmen lost their lives, and the three who survived became prisoners of war. By the end of the year, twenty of those who survived the raid had been subjected to subsequent bombing operations; such was the aircrew casualty figures for the Bomber Boy's War.

The raid was considered a success as both the Mohen and Eder dams were breached by two direct hits. The Sorpe dam was constructed differently and could not be destroyed in the same manner. The Upkeep weapon damaged the crest of this dam but only made a crack in the wall, which was not enough to breach the structure, the dam however was put of operation for a year. The 25 foot high deluge of water released by the destruction of the Mohen and Eder dams resulted in several underground mines being flooded. Armament factories, railway marshalling yards, and oil storage depots were also destroyed and the flood water washed away roads, bridges, and power stations. The area of destruction reached almost 50 miles throughout the Ruhr Valley seriously affecting the production of German armaments for many months. Ten thousand German troops were later diverted from other duties to defend the dams against any future attacks.

THE CANADIAN DAMBUSTERS
Canadians played a major role in all aspects of Bomber Command during World War II especially in Operation Chastise, the famous Dambusters raid. Among the 133 aircrew who participated in the raids, 30 were Canadians. Fifteen did not return, 14 were killed, and the one survivor, P/O John Fraser, became a Prisoner of War.

Two of the aircraft lost on route to the target were flown by Canadian airmen. Pilot Officer Vernon Barnes from Star City, Saskatchewan, flying AJ-K (King) was shot down as his aircraft approached the Dutch coast. Pilot Officer Lewis Burpee from Ottawa in command of AJ-S (Sugar) suffered the same fate when his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

Five of the airmen who survived the raids were from British Columbia: P/O John Fraser, Nanaimo; F/Sgt. Harvey Weeks, Chilliwack; F/Sgt. Grant MacDonald, Grand Forks; Sgt. William Radcliff, New Westminster; and Sgt. Percy Pigeon, Williams Lake.

This is Fraser's account of the attack on the Möhne Dam

We flew to the dams at an extremely low level and were raked with ground fire as we approached the dam, then a shell burst alongside and Hopgood feathered an engine that had been set on fire. The rear gunner and wireless operator were wounded, and the front gunner did not respond. Hopgood had also been hit but announced "I am pressing on to the target." AJ-M was the second aircraft to attack and as Fraser recalls: "The guns in the towers crossed up on us and the light flak battery came in on the side and we had to fly through the middle of it. I released the bomb. We were hit on the starboard wing and the engine came on fire immediately. We flew on, and over the radio the pilot gave the order to abandon the aircraft. Hopgood was struggling to get enough altitude so that some of the crew could escape; he knew he would not survive!

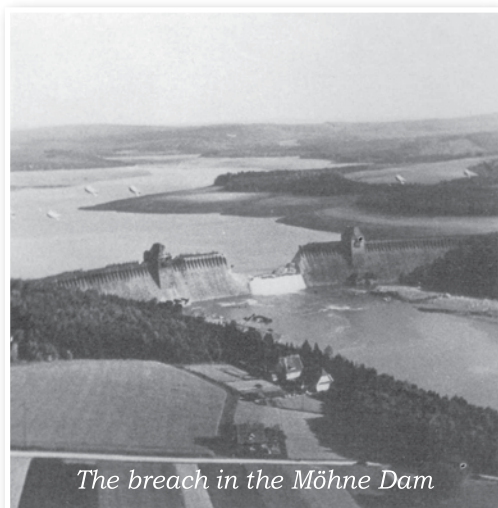


I knelt over the escape hatch and saw that the trees were awful damned close. I pulled the rip cord and let the pilot chute pull the main chute out and me with it and, within two or three seconds I touched the ground. Before I landed, I saw the aircraft crash about 2,000 feet away from me."

After being on the run for 10 days, heading for the Dutch border, he was spotted by German police and taken into custody. Fraser spent the next two years in three different POW camps including *Stalag Luft 3* where he was an active participant in the *Great Escape*.

John Fraser had married while stationed in England and after the war returned with his wife, Doris to Nanaimo. He built a home in Departure Bay and became an active member of the local flying club. Employed by the Mayo Lumber Company, he lost his life in 1962 while flying the company float plane during a log boom inspection. He is buried in the Cedar Cemetery, Yellow Point, near Nanaimo B.C.

It is always been a priority to honour local veterans in our exhibits, and the story of bomb aimer Pilot Officer, John Fraser of Nanaimo is prominently featured in the new RCAF Bomber Command Dambusters display.



Operation "Chastise" was a daring attack on German Hydro Electric Dams on May 16-17th 1943. The raid was carried out by No 617 Squadron Royal Air Force flying Lancaster Bombers modified to carry the amazing "Bouncing Bomb" nicknamed "Upkeep".

JOHN FRASER
 John Fraser from Nanaimo B.C., joined the RCAF in 1941 and was trained as a bomb-aimer. He had completed a four of 30 operations with Bomber Command No. 50 Squadron prior to being selected to join No. 617 Squadron, later known as (The Dambusters). Fraser was part of the crew on the Lancaster Bomber AJ-M (Mother) piloted by John Hopgood, which carried out the attack on the dams in Germany's Ruhr Valley.

John Fraser's account of the attack on the Möhne Dam
 "We flew to the dams at an extremely low level. At one point the rear gunner, Tony Burcher saw a looping arc of high tension cable above his line of vision. It then seemed to drop away behind the aircraft as Hopgood, the pilot, gained height, 'right under the bloody thing!', exclaimed the front gunner. 'Sorry about that,' said Hopgood. Soon after that AJ-M was raked feathered on engine that had been set on fire. As well as being shot in the leg and the front gunner, Gregory, did not respond over the intercom. The flight engineer shouted, 'Christ, look at the blood,' as he held a handkerchief to the pilot's head. 'I'm OK,' shouted Hopgood, 'Carry on and don't worry, I am pressing on to the target.'"

ATTACKING THE MÖHNE DAM
 AJ-M was the second aircraft to attack and Fraser recalled, "The guns in the towers opened up on us and we had to fly through the middle of it. We were hit on the starboard wing and the engine came on fire immediately as 25 seconds after we passed over the dam. I released the bomb. The pilot gave the order to abandon the aircraft within 25 seconds after we passed over the dam. I knelt over the escape hatch and pulled the rip cord letting the pilot chute go out first which pulled the main chute out and me after it. I swung to the vertical within two or three seconds and before I touched the ground I saw the aircraft crash about 2,000 feet away from me."

AFTER THE RAID - PRISON OF WAR
 Fraser found himself in a wheat field and hid his parachute in a culvert, hiding as German soldiers placed a cordon around the area. On the run for 10 days, Fraser headed for the Dutch frontier walking 200 miles and eating on a diet of carrots and turnips taken from the farmers fields. Exhausted and only 30 miles from the Dutch border he was spotted by German police and taken into custody. Fraser's POW interrogation report shows him to have been defiant and misleading about the raid which earned him a spell in solitary confinement. He spent the next two years in three different POW camps including Stalag Luft 3 where he was an active participant in the Great Escape.

HOME FROM WAR
 John Fraser had married while stationed in England and after the war returned with his wife, Doris to Nanaimo. He built a home in Departure Bay and became an active member of the local Flying Club. Employed by the Mayo Lumber Company he lost his life in 1962 while flying the company float plane during a log boom inspection in Salty Bay near Powell River on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. He is buried in the Cedar Cemetery Yellow Point near Nanaimo.

(Continued from page 1)

HMCS PRINCE HENRY

With the arrival of the depression and lack of financial opportunity *S.S. Prince Henry* was sold to Clarke Steamship Company for \$500,000 and moved to Montreal. *S.S. Prince Henry's* name was changed to *S.S. North Star*.

In 1939, Canada was ill prepared for war. The RCN had limited resources (6 destroyers and a couple of gate keepers). As in WWI, the government looked to civilian operators to increase ship numbers. The *North Star*, and her sister ships *Prince Robert* and *Prince David*, were purchased for the RCN. The RCN changed the name back to *H.M.C.S. Prince Henry*.

All three ships were converted to armed merchant cruisers by Canadian Vickers in Halifax. Upon completion, she was ordered to the Pacific, cruised off Peru, and eventually was involved with sinking two German merchant ships, *Hermonthis* and *Muenschen*. The ship then was ordered back to the naval base at Esquimalt B.C.

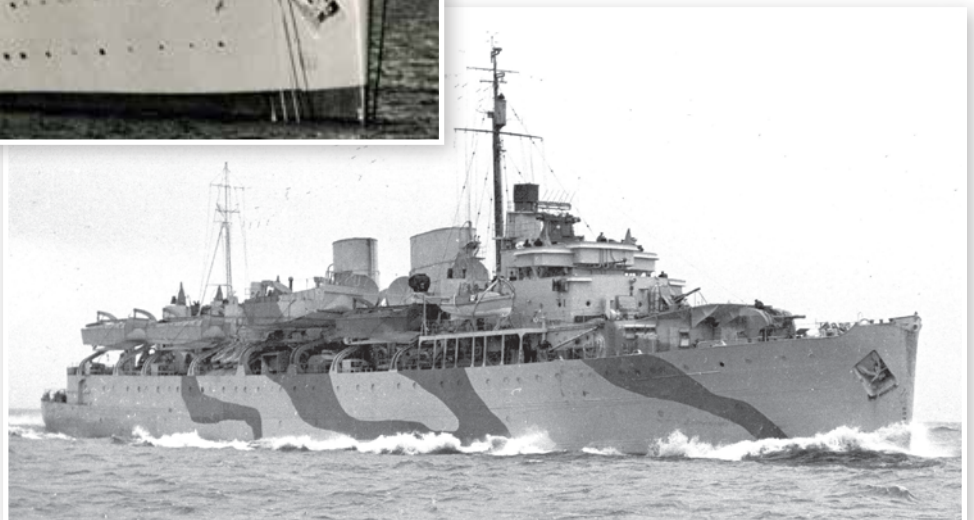
In 1941, Canada declared war against Japan. In early 1942, the Japanese occupied Kiska and Attu islands in the Aleutians. The U.S. assembled a force made up of Canadian elements of the army, RCN and RCAF to retake and secure Kiska in August 1942. The three Princess ships along with corvettes *H.M.C.S. Vancouver* and *H.M.C.S. Dawson* worked alongside U.S. forces to retake and secure the islands. *H.M.C.S. Prince Henry* spent her time escorting convoys between Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. The worst enemy in this campaign was the atrocious weather.

With the impending allied invasion of Europe, *H.M.C.S. Prince Henry* and her sister ship *H.M.C.S. Prince David* were converted to landing ships. The refit was carried out at the Burrard Dry Dock in Vancouver in 1943. The ship was converted to handle eight landing craft (LCAs), and was re-armed with two twin 4-inch mounts along with bofors and oerlikons. These were added to defend from enemy aircraft and engage German defense installations ashore.



H.M.C.S. Prince Henry - Armed Merchant Cruiser- new configuration 1940. Notice the old WWI 6-inch guns mounted on bow. Two 6 -inch guns were mounted in the rear and two 3-inch guns were located amidships

HMCS Prince Henry, 1944 (Landing Ship). Notice the changes in armament and addition of 8 landing craft (LCA) after conversion in 1943--a rather imposing ship!



In April 1944, the ship arrived in Britain for intensive training for Operation Overlord. On June 2, *Prince Henry* embarked 147 members of the Canadian Scottish along with support troops from the 7th Infantry Brigade. On June 5th, *Prince Henry* along with sister ship *Prince David* sailed for Normandy along with 6900 other vessels. *Prince Henry*

acted as senior ship of Force J1 of 528 Flotilla. The flotilla was composed of 22 merchant ships and *Prince Henry* was responsible for maintaining station-keeping, navigation, and efficiency. *Prince Henry* anchored seven miles off shore and at 0545 on the 6th of June, seven landing craft (LCA) carrying members of the Canadian Scottish proceeded to “Mike Beach” (a landing site on Juno Beach) near Courseulles-sur-mer.

LCA 856 and LCA 1021 were damaged on the run in, but both craft along with the other LCAs, made it to the beach and returned to the ship. “The Duty Boat” was hit by a mortar and required some maintenance but was quickly put back in action. The Canadian Scottish faced German resistance during the unloading. To cross that beach (75 -100 yards) took seconds and the Scottish were able to destroy a 75 mm gun casement. An officer described the landing:

“The Petty Officer in command of my L.C.A. was superb. The craft was landed according to plan. When the small armoured –plated doors...were opened and the ramp lowered, we could see the open grey beach ahead with not a person in sight....there was machine gun fire coming from the left...So skillful had been the landing that we were able to leap ashore without getting our feet wet...”
(R. Roy, Ready For The Fray. p220)

By early afternoon the army had moved inland and secured the beachhead. Both *Prince Henry* and *Prince David* began evacuating the wounded. During the next phase of the landings more reinforcements were disembarked including at the American’s Utah Beach. *Prince David* and *Prince Henry* would transport 5,556 troops over the next three weeks.

In July, *Prince Henry* was ordered to the Mediterranean and joined the Allied Forces in “Operation Dragoon”, the invasion of southern France. *Prince Henry* was selected as the Flagship for Rear –Admiral T.E. Chandler of the U.S.N. This was the first time a Canadian ship had ever been selected in this capacity. The *Prince Henry* landed 279 members of the combined elite Canadian- American commando First Special Service Force. The entire operation took two weeks and *Prince Henry* focused on landing troops and supplies from Corsica.

In September, *Prince Henry* was ordered to the Adriatic. In October, *Prince Henry* and *Prince David* disembarked troops, the Greek Prime Minister, and the government in exile, in Athens. *Prince Henry* continued supporting Allied operations in the Balkans until March 1945.

With the war all but over in Europe the British Admiralty requested the loan of the RCN’s *Prince Henry* and *Prince David* for landing operations in the Pacific. On April, 1945 *Prince Henry* was paid off by the RCN and transferred to the RN as *H.M.S Prince Henry*. After the war *Prince Henry* was transferred to the UK Ministry of War Transport and renamed Empire Parkeston. In 1956 she was commissioned back into the Royal Navy and used as a landing ship during the Suez Crises in 1956. The ship was then sold and broken up at La Spezia, Italy.

There is no question that *H.M.C.S Prince Henry* had a long and illustrious career (1930-1962). While other ships have received more attention, *Prince Henry* played a prominent role in the landings on D -Day, the Aleutians, and southern France. This writer would suggest that *H.M.C.S. Prince Henry* and her crews were very special, and Canadians should take pride in their accomplishments. To people in BC, *Prince Henry* takes her place in western maritime history. *H.M.C.S. Prince Henry*, along with her sister ships, filled an important gap in those early hard-pressed days of 1940. For a time, until the commissioning of *H.M.C.S. Uganda*, the Princesses were the most powerful elements of the RCN.



Canadian Scottish ready to disembark for Juno Beach June 6, 1944.



Landing craft from HMCS PRINCE HENRY proceeding to “Mike Beach” on June 6, 1944.

D DAY AND THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY 75TH ANNIVERSARY

Operation Overlord

June 6, 1944 was a turning point in the Second World War. The German armies were fighting ferociously on the Russian Front, and in Italy where our forces were taking great casualties and making slow progress. In the Atlantic, U Boats were still a major menace. Hundreds of airmen died every month in the bombing campaign against Germany. A successful invasion of France to take on and defeat the German army was not a sure thing.



Nurses of Number 10 Canadian General Hospital, RAMC, have just landed from the Mulberry artificial harbour at Arromanches, Normandy.

The Allies did have many advantages:

- Sea power – a huge fleet.
- Air superiority – the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force, was nearly destroyed before the invasion.
- Lessons learned from many other, if smaller, invasions.
- Specialized landing craft and swimming tanks.
- Highly trained and motivated forces.
- Secrecy and deception – The Germans were not sure where the invasion would take place.
- Mulberry artificial harbours

For the invasion, the Allies formed the largest naval armada in history. These ships landed 150 000 soldiers on June 6, along with 900 tanks and 5000 artillery pieces. More followed the next day, D+,1 and on every day thereafter. There would be a ferocious battle to keep the bridgehead, then to expand it, then to break out. The Normandy campaign lasted until late August.

The Canadian Scottish Regiment Vancouver Island's Own



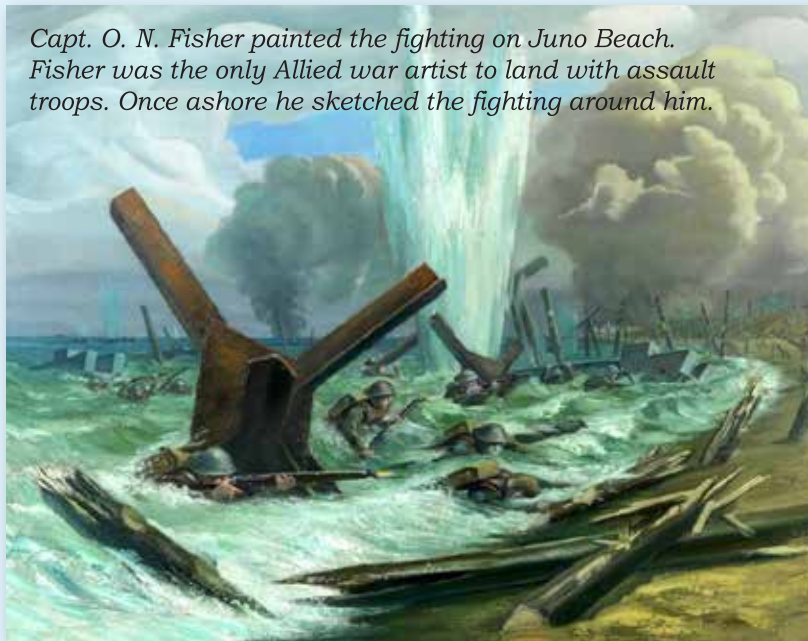
Originally based in Victoria, and containing men from all over Vancouver Island, The CSR were part of the first wave to attack on June 6. Their war diary for the day shows that 852 men were on strength. On *HMCS Prince Henry*, the troops were awakened at 04:40 hours and at 07:00 hours the landing craft were lowered into the water. The Can Scots war diary, prepared every day, tells the story.

07:50 C Company touched down

08:30 A Company and the C.O's party touched down about fifty yards from shore. A Company had already suffered some casualties in the crafts and on the beach. B Company touched down and were greeted by enemy mortar fire. One of their craft received a direct hit and caused several casualties before they were able to land. B Company were pinned down with a shower of directed mortar fire which was being directed by by an enemy pill-box on the extreme left of Mike Red Beach. This pill-box was finally cleared by the Beach Group and a German lieutenant with a dozen men surrendered. In spite of constant cross fire, the troops under noble leadership ploughed forward only using the cover available when the machine gun fire became too hot. The Battalion suffered many casualties in the attack. Every man realized the necessity of reaching the Battalion objective and went "all-out." This advance in the grain fields will linger in the minds of those who wee there.

The Canadian Scottish Regiment penetrated 11 km inland on June 6. Their casualties were 23 killed, 61 wounded, and 1 missing. The Canadian division was further inland than any other of the 5 Allied divisions that landed by sea.

Capt. O. N. Fisher painted the fighting on Juno Beach. Fisher was the only Allied war artist to land with assault troops. Once ashore he sketched the fighting around him.



Victor Osborne's Medals and a Unique History

When Victor Osborne came to the VIMM medal shop to have miniatures made, an amazing history was revealed by this sailor warrior. The medals themselves tell an amazing story of wartime service around the world: 39/45 Star, Atlantic Star, Africa Star, Burma Star/Pacific Clasp, Italy Star, Defence Medal, War Medal, and the commemorative Malta George Cross.

Born in England on November 11, 1918, he was named Victor for the victory and Albert, after the King of the Belgians. As a teenager he joined the Royal Navy in 1933 and was first sent to HMS Hood, then the world's most powerful battle cruiser. On the Hood until 1937, Victor learned the trade of torpedoman. During the Second World War, Victor served with distinction all over the world. He started volunteering for more and more dangerous jobs after his father was killed in England during the Blitz in 1940. Victor's five brothers also served during the war, two in the Royal Engineers and three in the Merchant Navy.

During the War, Victor served in many of the main theatres:

- In the Mediterranean, in the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle,
- In the English Channel, as part of the fleet supporting the American landings on D Day at Omaha Beach.
- In the Pacific and Burma, while attached to the Royal Australian Navy. In Burma, Victor was transported behind Japanese lines by Indian Army gunboats to blow up Japanese railway lines and bridges.
- At the war's end Victor was aboard HMS Quality, a Q Class destroyer, that was the first Commonwealth warship to enter Tokyo Bay.

It was a great honour to have this warrior visit the VIMM.



The Heathery Isle

New Novel by VIMM Volunteer



Iain Stewart, one of our volunteer docents, has published a novel set in the early part of the twentieth century. It is available in hard cover, paperback, and on *Kindle*. Below is a partial description of the plot.

Scotsman Ewan MacBride and German Peter Baum, both have 'histories' from their homelands that force them to stow away aboard a ship bound for Canada. With skills in blacksmithing and coopeage, the two men soon forge a brotherly friendship and together build a successful business in the thriving harbour city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. However, with the outbreak of World War I, the two friends find themselves on opposite sides, wearing the uniforms of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and the German Imperial army. *The Heathery Isle* brings to vivid life many historic battles including Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Verdun, Passchendaele, and the Last 100 Days, plus the sinking of the Titanic and the Halifax Explosion. As these two young men come of age in the battlefield trenches, they develop a mutual loathing for war and a deep longing to be reunited with their wives and the young children they barely know.

Iain Stewart. *The Heathery Isle: Home by Christmas*. Victoria: Friesen Press, 2018.



Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame. Contact us for further information and prices.



DISPATCHES

from VIMM



A New Name

This publication has always been more than a newsletter about VIMM events, often featuring original research articles by our volunteers. So, the new name, using the Canadian spelling for Dispatches. The font used for the title on the back page is the same as that of the Canadian Army newspaper in WW2 – The Maple Leaf

Record Setting Attendance

Pat Murphy reports:

The numbers have been added up and the visitor count for 2018 is very pleasing. We had 5,960 visitors, that's an increase of 690 visitors over last year. Our visitor count was up for 10 of the 12 months of 2018, November was an exceptional month with 944 visitors, August had 845 visitors: March was another tremendous month with 662 visitors. The number of visitors to Nanaimo has also exceeded last years numbers. Since we started keeping daily visitor count totals in 2013, we have had a total of 26,708 visitors through the museum. All volunteers have played a roll in this record number, we monitor the comments on social media and our volunteer staff is praised in almost every on-line comment. Our museum is highly rated and considered one of the most popular attractions in the city. We often get a 5 out of 5 rating and you can't do much better than that. Thanks to all of you for the great work you do.

Googled

The internet is playing a big role in attracting visitors to the VIMM. In January, 2019, we had 18 000 Google hits!

New Volunteers – Welcome Aboard!

Welcome to Rick Stevenson and Stuart Morrison.



Rick Stevenson



VIMM volunteers
Krista Hamilton and
Robert Muir

The Best Canadian Spitfire Display in the ... Galaxy!

Many visitors have been excited by our display honouring Canadian Spitfire pilots and their aircraft and have dubbed it the largest such display in the galaxy. No exaggeration.



Vancouver Island Flag

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