

## A wartime military story...

George Gordon Borgal

My name is George Gordon Borgal. I was born in Pleasant Harbour, Halifax County on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1921. My dad was an inshore fisherman during the summer, and also worked in the Tangier goldmines and in the woods cutting wood and pulp in the winter.

1939. Both my friend and me had joined the naval reserve in 1938. No particular reason. We could get work in the summer for two weeks with them. I was too young at first, so they made me a boy bugler and my pay with them was 50¢ a day. That's the first year. We had a card to go to the canteen and buy stuff. They had a dog as a pet there at the base, and he liked ice cream. We spent a lot of money going to the canteen and buying him his ice cream. When it came time for me to pay my canteen bill, I had a bigger bill than I had money coming to me. The CO gave me a good speech, gave me some good advice. Told me I should save 10% of my salary for old age; and I should give 10% to my church; and so forth. When I figured out all my contributions out of my 50¢, there wasn't much left!

While I was in training, I was supposed to learn to blow this bugle that they gave me. It was a pretty cruddy thing, all green and such. I had to clean it up and then try and play it up in the dormitory. The other fellows there didn't like that much. So there was a Dobie house – that's a little spot where you go to wash your clothes – it was down next to number 5 jetty. I'd go down there and try to get some sound out of it, but I didn't know what I was doing. The guys on the ship over on the dock used to yell at me because they didn't like much what I was doing – nothing but noise.

It ended up that I finished that training without ever learning to blow the bugle. But they gave me a badge that I put on the sleeve of my uniform saying I was a bugler. The following year I was old enough to become an ordinary seaman, so I went in for gunnery training.

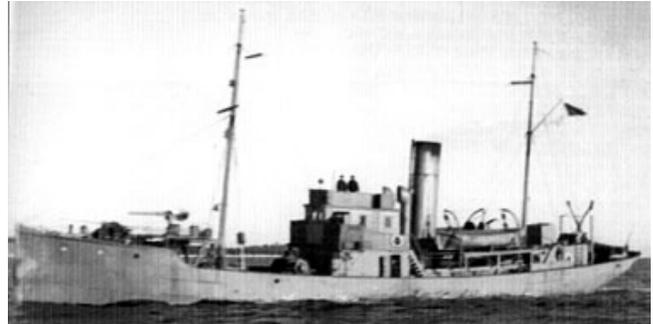
To a point, I was aware of what was going on over in Europe, but I didn't pay that much attention to it. During my first year as a seaman in 1939, I became what they called a seaman gunner, part of the guns crew on a destroyer. It was a very sharp noise firing it, but they didn't give you ear plugs, so we used to use cotton batting. They told us to keep our mouths open and the concussion would somehow balance out. But that didn't really work and I now have only 35% hearing in each ear.

My family had no objection to my joining up, although they had no military background themselves. In those days, with so little work around, if you could get in the navy on a regular basis, it was good. Being on the reserves, if they needed somebody they could transfer you up and make you permanent, which is what happened to me in May 1940.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, I was home – it was Sunday afternoon – and I heard on the radio that Great Britain declared war. About a half hour later, the phone rang and it was the Chief at the Halifax naval reserve base. And he said, "You report in tomorrow morning, fully booted and spurred."

So I reported in on Labour Day. I reported on Monday morning, and was told to take my hammock up to the dormitory and find myself a spot. The next morning, Tuesday, after doing my in-routine, I started my first job which was as a sentry on the convoy room. That's where the merchant ship skippers used to

get together and the navy guys would explain to them what the routine was on a convoy. It used to be quite amusing for the old merchant captains to come along and see this young fellow standing guard with a rifle and an eighteen inch bayonet. One of them said, joking, "You point that thing at me, and I'll stick it up your so-and-so." So I took my rifle and pointed it at him, as if to say, "Try me." But they all just laughed.



HMCS Bras D'or

Finally, after asking over and over, I got myself on a ship. It was the Bras d'Or. She was a minesweeper. The Bras d'Or was a converted lightship about the size of a fishing trawler; a lot of trawlers were converted to mine sweeping, because sweeping fish and sweeping mines are quite similar. It had gear out on either side with cutters that ran under the surface of the water and would cut the mines loose. She had a crew of about 35.

Being raised in a fishing village, you learn to handle and steer boats. So being on a boat was pretty natural to me. We got along fine as a crew. If you got into a fight onboard, the Coxswain would get a pair of boxing gloves for each, then you'd go up on the quarterdeck with the crew around the two who were fighting, and they'd do three two-minute rounds. Or first blood. Then it was stopped. At the end, they had to shake hands or they weren't men. Get the drift? Then they'd be friends after that. You were like a family on a ship; you helped one another. If you wanted a hand, you got help.

At the beginning of the war, anything that floated was bought for the navy. The Bras d'Or was an old thing; they got it out of some old shipyard, and it was unseaworthy. The captain had no faith in her whatsoever; none of us did.

One day, I was on the wheel as a special job when entering and leaving harbour, and the cook missed ship. When I got relieved on the wheel, the captain said, "You do the cooking." "I don't know anything about cooking." "Well, what in the devil's wrong with you? Haven't you ever seen your mother cookin'?" "Yessir." "Well go do what she does."

I went down, got a whole bunch of eggs, boiled them up, and that was breakfast. Then I went aft into the icebox and saw this big chunk of meat. I'd seen my mother put such a thing in the oven, so I put it in a pan, put a little water in it, and put it in the oven. Got some potatoes and carrots, tossed them in. And we had a roast for dinner; I cut it up for them, and everyone was pretty pleased. I got cleaned up, and we eventually came back into port. There was the cook, waiting for us. The gang on the boat, just skylarking, were shouting to him, "Get outta here. George is a better cook than you! Away you go!" It wasn't so at all, of course. And I discovered afterwards that I'd used up four days worth of meat rations in that one meal.

Our runs were usually only for a day, and we'd be back in harbour at night. And we'd take turns going out at night to do patrols as well.

This went on to about May 1940, when I got word that I would be accepted in the permanent force. The captain told me that he'd recommend that I leave then and transfer to a destroyer, and I agreed. It's what I wanted to do. So I transferred to the destroyer Saguenay and went off to a further gunnery course; she had a sister ship, Skeena. These were ships built specially for the Canadian navy, with reinforced bows to handle small ice.

On my first trip overseas on the Saguenay, we come across two lifeboats from a Norwegian merchant ship that had been torpedoed, so we took them on board. They'd been out three days, but were in pretty good shape. One guy told me, "We weren't too concerned. We had our sail up; we'd have made it in a week or so."

We took them in to Greenock, Scotland and I was in the war.

As part of the gunnery crew, we didn't have any headgear or protection. We were given hoods for flash protection, but we never wore them. When an action alarm sounded, you went to your gun, to where you were supposed to be.

You weren't allowed to shower at sea 'cause there wasn't enough water. But we used to have what we called a birdbath. You fill a sink with water, and more or less sponge yourself down all over. In a way, you were cleaning your bird: that's where the name came from!

This one day, I was doing this and an alarm went. Wherever you went on ship, you had your lifejacket and gear with you. Problem was, I was covered with soap. I grabbed my kit and away I went to the gun. We were travelling at high speed, and the salt water was spraying back over me. Boy, was it itchy getting it all over you.

From that point on, we were on convoy duty. An escort group would bring the merchantmen across, and we'd come out to meet them then bring them into harbour in Scotland. This was what we were doing, out of Greenock, then Londonderry later on, and Scapa Flow. Normally about every 3 convoys, you'd get three or four days in port. Depending on what they required of you.

The routine was just something that you did; it was what it was. No different than if you'd been a carpenter. We didn't think about it much.

We were torpedoed on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940. We were about four, five hundred miles south-west of Ireland. We'd left the convoy because one of the merchant ships was straggling behind, and we went back to hurry her up. We always were a little bit suspicious of certain ships traveling in the convoy that came from 'neutral' countries, maybe being a little in favour of the Germans. I'm not saying it was true in this case, but it could happen.

It was just before four in the morning. When we approached this merchant ship, a submarine fired three torpedoes at us. One went ahead, one went under the bridge, and the other one hit behind the bow. I was standing on a bench on this open bridge at the time, leaning against the metal, when we were hit. The explosion lifted the bow up and I went flying. In those days, you didn't have protective gear to wear. All I had on was a greatcoat and an oilskin over that to keep me warm. I

landed on top of a couple of officers over by the ASDIC hut. My left leg was numb when I got up, and I felt the ship start to roll, back and forth, and I thought she was going to go down.

I threw off my binoculars, unbuttoned my coat to blow up my Mae West, and let my coat slide off my shoulders to get at it. But when I did that, I couldn't get my arms out of the sleeves. I was handcuffed in that position. Wow; that was a feeling, I'll tell you.

The gunnery officer got himself to his feet and he helped me out of it. I went to the side of the bridge and saw that she had settled up a bit. You were always told that the best lifeboat is the ship you're on.

We'd been doing our four-on four-off shifts. You didn't get much rest when you were on convoy duty. The fellow who was supposed to relieve me hadn't shown, so I asked another guy who was being relieved to go below decks to find this so-and-so and tell him to get up here.

He later told me that he had gone down through the canvas blackout dodger when the torpedo hit. And of course, the flash from the torpedo goes through the passageways. He had a beard, and his beard just disappeared. His face and lips were pretty badly burnt. If I'd had been relieved on time, I would have been down there with him and been burnt as well, or worse.

Our mast was broken and a fire broke out and our bow was gone. Even with all the damage, the Captain maintained 12 knots. The submarine surfaced and started coming towards us. 'B' gun, forward of the bridge, opened fire on the sub. I remember looking through my binoculars and seeing the shell hit just before the conning tower. The next shot went over the sub, then it crash dived and took off.

I heard after the war that it was an Italian sub, not German, and that they'd fired their last three torpedoes at us. If they'd had another, they would have fired it at us and we would have been done.

The convoy had seen the fire and sent a ship back. Flames drove us off the bridge to a secondary steering position. The captain had turned the ship around, so now we were traveling astern into the wind. The XO came along and told me to relieve the X gun aft, on the quarterdeck.

HMS Highlander arrived, and we were to leave only a skeleton crew on the Saguenay. Everyone else was being transferred over by whaler. I wanted to stay with the Saguenay. Some of the men were married and I figured they should get off first. But they were moving people by watch, so I eventually had to go over to the Highlander.

When I arrived, they were serving tots. The guy serving said to me, "Are you a grog?" "No, I'm a U.A." Which meant underage. The guy behind me punched me in the back and said, "You could a taken the tot and passed it along!"

They got the fire out on the Saguenay, and she was cruising back to Greenock stern first. There were 21 men killed in that attack. One of the men who was killed was my friend from back in Nova Scotia who'd helped me get that job delivering groceries a few years before: Harvey Hare.

The tug came out and met us. But the captain took her in all the way. The Saguenay went in to Furness to be refitted, and the Highlander took us in to Liverpool.

When we were offloaded onto the jetty, the army fellows came up and marched us off to a train, like prisoners of war, escorted the whole way. Some of us didn't even have proper clothing; some of us in sock feet. They were keeping an eye on us and keeping us together. All for security. They couldn't be certain who we were or what we knew.

They put us on the train and locked us in and off we went to the south of England. The train stopped briefly in Crewe, right opposite a pub. Some of the guys were saying, "What we wouldn't do for a beer." Somebody found one window open, so we gave this one guy all the money we had and squeezed him out the window.

"You go get us some and pass it back to us through the window." He was in his sock feet, too. But off he goes. Time went by, and the train starts to pull out. This guy comes running out, still in his sock feet, carrying all this beer, dropping bottles as he ran. He never did catch up with us till the next day at HMS Drake in Devonport.

After that, you get what's known as 'Survivor's Leave.' We didn't know where to go; Scotland was all we knew, so that's where we went, a couple of guys and me. Glasgow. One of the guys was a MacIntosh and wanted to look up his relatives, so we decided to help. We were staying at the Sally Ann, and weren't making much headway finding his people, so for one reason or another – maybe he'd got a name or something - we ended up going to a place called Motherwell just outside of Glasgow.

We didn't know where to start looking there, so we went to the police station; to see if they could do anything for us. We didn't make much headway there either, but the chief of police made friends with us. He was awfully good to us. It turned out he'd just lost his son in the air force and he sort of latched on to us.

He was very good to us. We'd go to the station, shoot pool, have a cup of tea. No sooner would you step off the bus than a police car would pull up and take you to the station. He took us to Edinburgh, Holyrood House – all these places by car. We'd get back into town just as a restaurant was closing, and he'd talk them into keeping it open for us. The staff would be held back, just for us. The police chief would say to the owner, "I don't suppose you'd have any scotch, would you?" Scotch was scarce then, it was all being exported.

"I think I might be able to find a bottle," the owner would say. And a bottle would appear and everyone would sit down with us and have a drink. Whenever we'd come into port after that, I'd make a special trip out to Motherwell to see him. I'd bring silk stockings to his housekeeper, tobacco to her husband, and chocolates to him. Whenever I had the chance. He's passed on now. But after the war, his one ambition was to come to Canada and hitchhike across the country. But he didn't make it.

After we finished that survivor's leave, they added Christmas leave to it and we got back to Devonport between Christmas and New Years in 1940. We worked on work gangs for several months while our ship was being worked on. Our job was filling in bomb craters with pick and shovel. There were sixty of us under a Scots chief. We laid gas pipes, we built roads. It was all fine; just something else to do. That's the way it was: you kept busy and you were happy.

During this time waiting for the Saguenay to be repaired, I picked up a newspaper from Halifax. I was glancing over it and there on the front page, eight lines down, was the

headline, "Bras d'Or lost with all hands." She was sunk up the St. Lawrence while escorting a ship down to Sydney. She just disappeared. Nobody knew what happened to her. She was unseaworthy, she was old, she was something that should never have been put in the position she was in. But that didn't make it any easier to read about. I think she'd gone missing the next trip after I'd left her.

I took a gunnery course during that five-month break, and by May, the ship was re-commissioned and we went back. We did our trials, and headed back north.

When the Bismarck sank the Hood (May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1941), we were sent out with the home fleet to chase her. At speed, we could do upwards of 35, 37 knots. But we didn't have the capacity for distance at high speed. We weren't involved in any action with the Bismarck, but we went over the area where the Hood had been sunk, through the oil that was laying there on the water. I remember we were doing about 26 knots then, and the spray coming back and hitting us with this residue from the ship...

After that, we went back on convoy duty. We were on the Iceland route, to Newfoundland. I remember it was on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1942, my birthday, four o'clock in the morning, we sailed from Reykjavík. The water was flat calm, like oil. Completely still. I was always told by the fishermen in a fishing village, that "...if you see the water like that, then look out: something's coming."

That night the storm hit. We spent a week in a hurricane. The convoy dispersed. There was a Norwegian whaling factory ship who stood by us. The wind was 135 knots. The seas were 75 feet. We were pounded. The cooks couldn't cook after a while; salt water got into our fresh water supply. As best as I can remember, for two or three days we didn't have water or food.

The forward magazine cordite cases had their racks broken, and they were tumbling around down loose in the magazine. We'd go into a sea bow down, then we'd come up and the wind would catch us and wrench us around and slam us back down into the sea. When the bow would go down, you'd look aft and see the stern up in the air, vibrating, like a diving board. We'd taken on about 1 to 2 feet of water in the wardroom, the officer's quarters, and the captain's quarters.

She pounded badly - One time she hit so hard, she stove in her bottom and we took on water there, too. We rigged a pump to pump her out, but then that clogged, so we had to do a bucket brigade to keep the water moving out. The stanchions were three, four inches around, and they were all bent. We lashed down as many of the cordite cases as possible.

It was even too rough to be comfortable in hammock. (Hammocks were wonderfully comfortable.) To me, for that length of time, it was even worse than being torpedoed. It took the captain's launch, snapped it away, so it was just two pieces of wood hanging off the keel, and seas hit the whaler aft taking both whaler and davits. It split the whaler on the other side of the ship down the middle.

We finally got into Newfoundland, and went alongside of our sister ship, the Skeena. We pulled up to the jetty, and were all dying to get to this water pipe they had there on the jetty. We wanted to rinse out our mouths with fresh water and to get a drink of it into us. But we were told not to drink anything but small amounts until our bodies got used to it. The Skeena's crew came onboard and helped us clean up.

I remember seeing our Captain coming down off the bridge; he hadn't slept for most of that week. He looked a wreck, his clothes all sodden and stretch, his face pale and drawn. He disappeared into the Skeena's captain's quarters, and we didn't see him for more than 24 hours while he got a much-deserved rest.

As soon as we were able, we slipped St. John's and came back to Halifax. It took about three months for a refit, and then went back on convoy duty, escorting one of the Lady boats, Lady Rodney, I think, to St John's and then to rejoin our Escort Group. En route, a convoy passed ahead of us when we gained Asdic contact on a possible submarine. In the Morning Watch, with the convoy proceeding to the St Lawrence, a straggler, the AZRA, cut 35 feet off our stern which included propellers and depth charges on the quarterdeck. The depth charges were armed for use if the submarine was detected, and exploded as the stern sank and as the freighter was backing off. Her bottom was blown out and she sank slowly bow first in about 3 hours. She also lost her first mate who had gone below to check damage and became trapped. Saguenay lost an engineering officer who was taking passage and who was in one of the officer's cabins when the collision occurred. We picked up Azra's survivors using one of our whalers. The seas were running right up on Saguenay's decks from astern, so we had to pump out fuel to keep the ship up. We were towed back to St. John's and I went to Sydney on a minesweeper with 60 of the survivors.

The Saguenay was then taken to Cornwallis and used as a training ship, which ended my career on her. We used to call that ship 'The Lady that refused to sink.'

I finished my leave, and when I come back, they told me I was drafted to a corvette. I told them I had to get my kit, and this guy behind the desk, said, "Don't you know where your kit is?!"

"I can tell you if you come out from behind that desk," I told him. "The last time I seen it was off the coast of Cape Race."

I was a leading seaman at that time and didn't really want the duty on a corvette. Through the Master-at-Arms who I knew from Saguenay when it was torpedoed, I got word to the commander and managed to get my draft changed. I went back over to England to join the crew of the Kootenay. She'd been drafted from the Far East where she was before the war, and still had deck fittings that simply weren't going to work in convoy duty up north. But there were too many of my rank onboard anyway, so I couldn't stay on that ship. When I was asked where I'd like to go next, I said, "New construction." I'd seen my fair share of old, refitted ships. Lieutenant Commander Dyer (later Admiral) smiled and agreed.

I went back to Quebec to wait for my new ship, a frigate, that was being completed, the Cape Breton. These ships were designed primarily to remedy what were considered defects in the Corvette design. The basic Corvette hull was widened and lengthened, and was given twin screws. This resulted in a faster ship with twice the range, and much more seaworthy. A far better ship to sail on, and far more comfortable than a corvette.

Just before it was commissioned, there was a fire in the boiler room. The local fire department was called, but they wouldn't let the fire truck in at the gate because it didn't have a pass. The Captain went up to the gate and jumped on the fire truck.

"Open the gate," he shouted to the guard. Then to the driver of the truck, he said, "Take her through. If the gate's not open, you take it with you." And the gate was opened.

It wasn't a big fire; only delayed us a couple of weeks. We headed out. We went to Boston, got RADAR installed, and that's where, for the second time, I met my wife-to-be. They used to live in Halifax, but they'd moved a few years before. We kept in touch, and later on after the war, we got married.

Back on convoys, we were doing runs up north to Murmansk. In 1944, during the invasion, we worked the Channel running U-boat patrols. There were some sub attacks and German patrol boats harassing the shore, but none of this involved us. Come June 6, we had been at sea since May 20<sup>th</sup>, cruising off the southwest coast of France. I was relaxing in our mess deck with a few shipmates, when suddenly the shrill whistle of the Bos'n's pipe was heard over the ship's PA system.

It was the captain, Lt. Commander M.C. McLaren. Without preamble, he said the following:

"This is the day and this is the hour. As I speak to you now, thousands of brave lads are preparing to storm the beaches of Normandy. Spare a few moments now for the brave boys, as today, for many of them, will mark the dawning of eternity. Indeed, we may well be among them before the sun sets on this momentous day in world history. However, we will place our trust in He who holds us all in the palm of his hand."

A few days later, we were on patrol in the Channel. We came across a landing craft returning from France and the engine had broken down. They'd managed to unload the soldiers from it and put an engineer on to try and get it going. But he couldn't. A storm was coming on and as it started blowing the landing craft started to break up. We happened to come along just in time and pulled alongside and pulled the crew off of it. We tried to tow it back, but it was taking on water. Finally, it turned over, so we sunk it with gunfire.

We got to know the guys from the landing craft a little bit on our way back to harbour, and they were thankful and all. We unloaded them and that was that.

In 1998, we had a reunion and it was advertised in England. One of the guys from the landing craft caught wind of this and said, "I wonder if that's the Cape Breton that rescued us?" So in due course, a letter was sent over and one of our fellows picked it up. Two of these fellows eventually came over to Canada for the reunion to thank the crew for saving their lives. I wasn't able to make it to that one, but I heard about all this.

One of these guys was so thankful that he invited me to his fiftieth wedding anniversary. And if we'd like to come, he said he'd send me the tickets. I thought, "Gee, that's a little much." But he was serious. So my wife and I and two other couples went over and spent two weeks there, and we couldn't pay for a single thing. Everywhere we went, he'd prearranged it that everything was taken care of. Because we'd saved his life fifty-five years before; otherwise, he'd never have had a fiftieth wedding anniversary.

After the invasion was over, we went back to Halifax for a refit; I went off to Cornwallis for another gunnery course, and that's where I found myself when the war in Europe ended.

I was slated to head out to the Pacific, and even shipped out to the west coast. But I wasn't happy out there. The

war in the Far East ended, and I wanted to get back east. So I managed to get myself drafted for an assignment back east in Halifax training seamen. And I started life with my new wife, already pregnant with our first child.

You grew up fast during the war. I was a boy when I went in, and was in the whole war. It didn't take too much bouncing around for you to mature. Getting bombed every night in England changes you. You get used to it, but it changed you. In terms of getting along with people, I never had much problem. Crews worked together. If you were a troublemaker, you'd be the loser, and the rest of the crew would make sure of that.

I think it would be good for people to know what really happened, the good and the bad. And I think it's really important that the women who were left behind, looking after families, get recognized for what they did, too. I know of one case in the States where this woman had a pension; she was young, and her husband had passed away. She met another fellow, but if she'd married him, she'd have lost the pension. And if that hadn't worked out, she would have been without the pension. A lot of them were left with nothing.

Here's what I felt should have happened. Service people, serving overseas in the front line, should get double pay. If they are killed in the line of duty, their wife carries on receiving the money he was earning. Also, their children would have their university paid for by the government. And that all profits made by companies selling materials towards the war efforts, that their profits should go towards paying for the war after it's finished.

***I only wish that our government would take a stronger position in providing our armed forces with the proper up-to-date equipment. Not leave it as it is today. And not to leave it as we found it when we went to war in 1939.***

***You can fight bad weather with training and good equipment if your ship is strong. But if it isn't...***

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