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Corvettes Canada: Convoy Veterans of WW II Tell Their True Stories [Review]

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BOOK REVIEWS

Corvettes Canada

Mac Johnston, *Corvettes Canada: Convoy Veterans of WW II Tell Their True Stories*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1994

No image is more evocative of the Canadian experience at sea during the Second World War than that of a rust encrusted small escort ship corkscrewing its way through the rolling Atlantic. If pressed, any Canadian with a modicum of knowledge about that war would venture that that small ship was probably a corvette, and they would be right. It was the ubiquitous corvette, built in Canada, manned by volunteers and often as not based in a Canadian or Newfoundland port, that carried the burden of our Atlantic war. In the end the Royal Canadian Navy operated more corvettes (123) than any other type of vessel, and few wartime sailors escaped at least some time aboard them. For the most part, their experiences have gone unrecorded—especially those of the lower deck—and time will soon erase what the enemy and the sea itself could not. Fortunately, Mac Johnston has salvaged the experiences of 250 of these fast-departing corvette veterans, and has drawn their story together into a superb collective memoir of the Atlantic war.

Corvettes Canada is a first-class piece of oral history and a primary source in its own right. The book is based on extensive interviews and correspondence, and on a solid understanding of the larger historical context. The

larger context provides the essential, but unobtrusive, backbone of the book. Johnston has avoided the pitfall of many amateur historians who assume that participation in events or particular knowledge imparts a special understanding of the bigger picture. It is often difficult to suggest to some one 'who was there' that his view of the war from the bridge was limited, but unless they have read widely, veterans have little understanding of the wider campaign in which they fought. Thus it is crucial that a compiler of their reminiscences get the larger picture correct. The historical framework of *Corvettes Canada* is based on a thorough and nuanced understanding of the history of the RCN's Atlantic war, and that adds immeasurably to the value of Johnston's book. That it is so solidly based is just another example of the tremendous positive impact which the soon-to-be moribund Directorate of History, at NDHQ, has had on military history in this country. This is not the first time DHist has acted as mentor on a useful project by an amateur historian, but it may well be one of the last and the field of military history in this country will be much the worse for its demise.

The book itself is organized in a rough combination of chronology and theme which tries to capture something of what it was like to serve in corvettes, the experience of leave in different ports, and battles with the sea and with U-boats. The organization is 'roughly' chronological because although *Corvettes Canada* starts from the earliest corvettes, their basic capabilities, first operations and

then follows them through to the end of the war in subsequent chapters, there is much overlapping of the thematic information with little gems of information scattered throughout. Chapter four, for example, tackles some of the early operations and also what it was like to be in a corvette in bad weather. The separate discussion of seasickness follows only in chapter eight. Johnston might be criticised for an eclectic organization, but many of these topics are inter-related and he has done a masterful job of knitting them all together. The result is a book one can pick-up and thoroughly enjoy reading on whatever page it falls open to.

Corvettes Canada is plain good reading. For historians-professional and otherwise-of the Atlantic war, this is also a truly invaluable primary source. There is a wealth of information here on the social life of corvette sailors: conditions of service, marvellous insights into life at sea and anecdotes about hijinks in port. Much of this recounting of action provides unique and historically valuable insights into events already well documented in the existing literature. The key to getting at this information lies in the thorough index, which makes *Corvettes Canada* a handy reference.

The same enthusiasm for the unique and valuable is evidenced in Johnston's choice of photographs. All have been culled from the collections of Old Salts and although some of them originated with official photographers, most have never been published before. There are delightful shots taken aboard the

ships, some remarkable new portraits of corvettes (like *Sackville*) and one of the dummy wooden gun fitted to *Trillium* for her first Atlantic crossing.

Johnston has also gone to considerable effort to make this book 'accessible' to the novice, explaining how things like asdic, depth charges and radar worked and were operated, and what various officers and petty officers were responsible for. In the process he has recorded for posterity much arcane information which will soon be hard, if not impossible, to retrieve. Indeed, it's hard to underestimate the importance of the information recorded in *Corvettes Canada* that would otherwise have been lost-and it is sobering to reflect on what has already been carried to the grave or discarded by dis-interested or ill-informed executors of estates.

Collective memoirs are not always successful and works by amateur historians are often flawed by their failure to keep abreast of the historical writing in their field. Neither of these criticisms can be applied to *Corvettes Canada*. Johnston has woven the memories of 250 Old Salts from 50 different ships and the history of the wartime RCN into a tight fabric, one that is both entertaining and extremely valuable. If you have never read anything on the Canadian navy's part in the Battle of the Atlantic start with this one: if you've read everything that's already available you will find this one a gem.

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