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Tom Wood: Naval War Artist (1913–1997)

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Obituary

Tom Wood

Naval War Artist

(1913-1997)

Laura Brandon

Thomas Charles Wood, one of Canada's notable naval Second World War official war artists, died on 28 October 1997 after a short illness. He was 84. Born in Ottawa on 2 May 1913 he studied art with F.H. Varley of the Group of Seven, and Franklin Brownell, an Ottawa artist of some renown. After the war he became chief designer at the Canadian Government Exhibition Commission, and ultimately chief of design and displays for the National Museums of Canada. Wood had significant artistic and creative input into the Canadian Pavilion at Expo 67. He continued to paint throughout his life.

A slight, soft-spoken, almost elfin looking man, he had an enormous capacity for enjoyment, and tremendous enthusiasm for his craft. On one occasion, alerted to the fact that a former fellow naval war artist, Tony Law, whom he had not seen in fifty years would be visiting the war art collection at the Canadian War Museum, he happily agreed to surprise him. Their encounter was a moving experience.

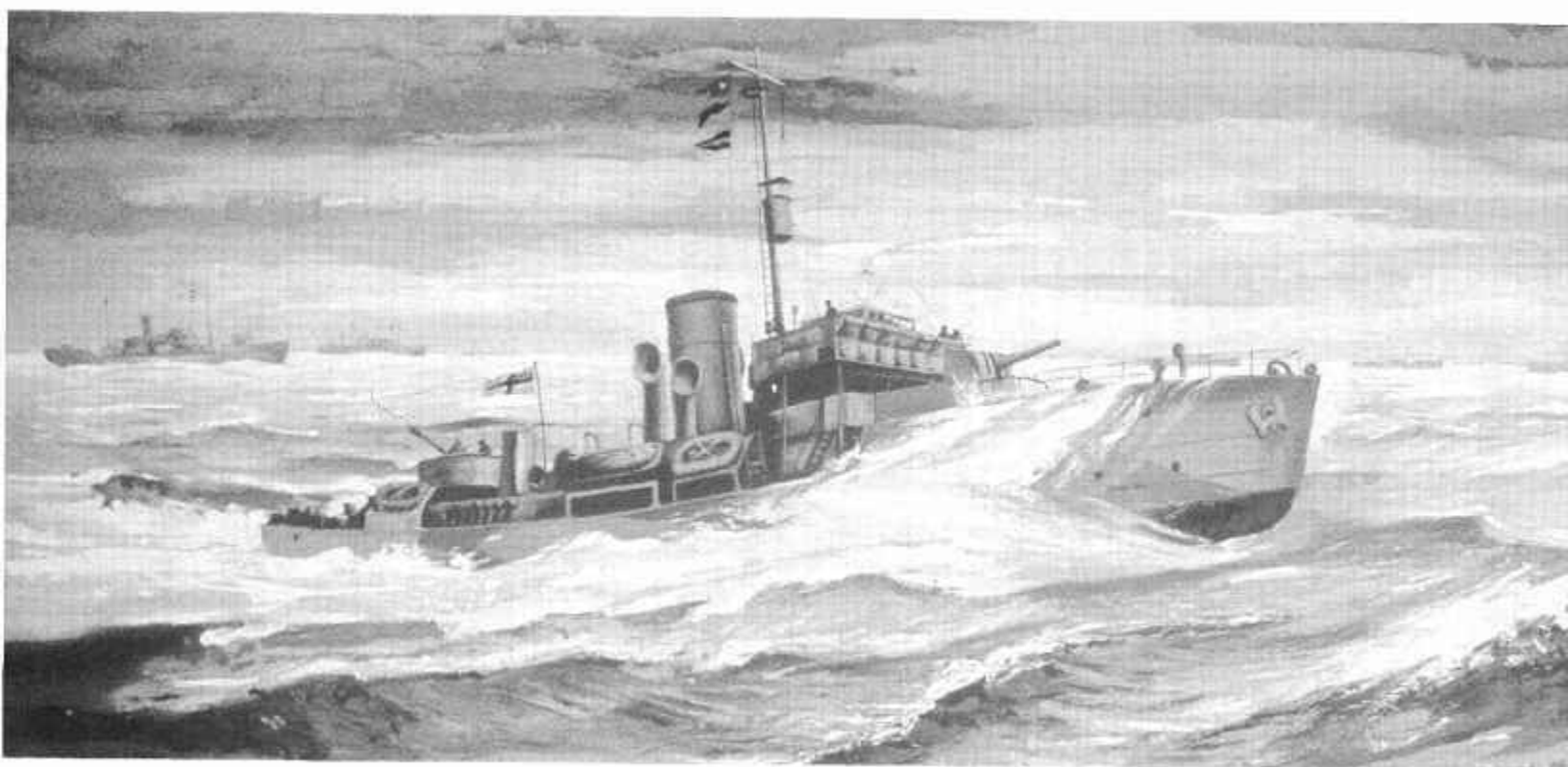
Tom Wood entered the naval service in May 1943 as an artist with special services. One of his early tasks was to paint an exceptionally large portrait of a generic corvette on convoy duty in the North Atlantic. For many years this painting entitled *Mid-Ocean Escort* (19930090-001) was on display at HMCS *Carleton* in Ottawa until it was transferred to the Canadian War Museum in 1993. There it was fully restored and hung in pride of place in the exhibition, *Victory* in 1995-1996. At the time that this painting was completed, the artist had never actually been to sea, and had only his imagination, photographs,



and a creative impulse to bring the subject to life.

This situation was soon remedied when he was appointed an Official War Artist in January 1944. In February he crossed the Atlantic to England, one of several crossings, and was appointed lieutenant in May. Arriving in London he wrote to H.O. McCurry, the Director of the National Gallery, regarding his "battle" with London. "It is with no little pleasure that I can report that I am more or less the victor...(not after some sore feet though). The streets here insist on not being square."¹ Not long after, he moved to Southampton, on the south coast, where he captured in paint preparations for the invasion of Europe. He was subsequently a participant in the D-Day landings on 6 June, having crossed the Channel in the early hours in an LCI(L). In 1945 he spent some considerable time painting naval activity in and off Newfoundland as part of a programme initiated by the National Gallery of Canada.

The Atlantic crossing works contain many images of life on board HMCS *Drumheller*, a corvette. Wood captures both the below-decks activities of the sailors as they read, eat, write letters, talk, and generally relax, plus detailed visual accounts of their watch activities. In *Quarter Deck of HMCS 'Drumheller'* (10601) he paints the crew carrying out their duties in high seas, the deck awash with water, and the ship heeled over at a 30 degree angle. In *Frigate's Bridge* (10569), on board a different vessel, he provides a detailed depiction of the equipment found on a bridge.



Mid-Ocean Escort



Above:
*Quarter Deck of HMCS
Drumheller*

Right:
Frigate's Bridge





CWM CN 1

Above:
*Disembarking Troops from LCI's,
'D-Day'*



Left:
'D-Day'

Opposite right:
*German Prisoners Leaving their
U-Boat, Bay Bulls,
Newfoundland*

CWM CN 10558

Wood's D-Day paintings such as *Disembarking Troops from LCI's, 'D-Day'* (13133) and *'D-Day'* (10558), form an important record of Canadian participation in the event. Arriving three hours after the first soldiers had gone ashore, he later described his working conditions and methods as an artist there to a newspaper journalist. "Our LCI was lucky - no casualties at all. The craft was pitching around too roughly to permit any sketching, so I stood up and took pictures with a borrowed camera, made careful notes of colors [sic] and other details, and did my sketches and paintings later. Snipers were firing at us, but their aim was poor; only one man in our whole flotilla was wounded."²

The ongoing reality of his experiences as a war artist at this time were ultimately to inform his painted record of these events in that while he witnessed death, he was unable to paint it, preferring instead subjects that survived and found some moments of happiness away from battle. According to the account he gave the above-mentioned newspaper journalist, two days after the initial landings, Wood had participated in towing a damaged LCI back to England, and when he returned to Normandy. "...I saw something I don't like to remember," he recalled. "Ten British soldiers trying to wade ashore were swept off their feet by the swell and toppled face-down into the water. Their heavy packs were

buoyant and kept them floating - but with their faces just under the water. Nobody could help them. They were all drowned, one after the other, while I stood helplessly watching."³ But it was this sensitivity to tragedy that also made the artist aware of its corollary - joy. The happiness that suffuses the faces of the sailors in the watercolour *Southampton Pub, 'D-Day' Plus One* (10612) attests to their relief at having made it back from the first landings when the risk of dying was high.

The Newfoundland work centres on the harbour of St. John's, which is painted in all its rugged grandeur. The artist was also able to visit Bay Bulls and was present when the German U-Boat U-190, surrendered on 11 May. *German Prisoners Leaving their U-Boat, Bay Bulls, Newfoundland* (10571) is his depiction of the event. Wood also made a tour of other naval bases in the Maritimes, including Shelburne, Halifax, Gaspé, and Lunenburg. Some of the artist's sketchbooks have survived, and in some cases notes he made about the subjects he painted. For example, for the Newfoundland work he wrote careful explanations to accompany each painting, perhaps aware that his legacy would likely be in the hands of art historians rather than the technically informed. For example, he wrote of the painting entitled *Ammunition Storage Tunnel* (10539): "The short dead-end tunnel straight ahead is an anti-blast chamber,



the purpose of which is to dissipate the shock rather than have it follow the tunnel which curves to the left. The yellow objects lining the tunnel on the right are Squid Projectiles."⁴

But this factual dryness was not a characteristic of his letters to National Gallery Director H.O. McCurry, who almost uniquely developed remarkably good relationships with

a majority of the war artists. The result was, through his personal correspondence, the addition of a human dimension to the record of many war artists' service. Of the Newfoundland weather Wood wrote: "It is utterly atrocious[sic] It has to be seen to be believed. Most of the time your subject matter is completely cut off from view."⁵

While Tom Wood's official war art forms a remarkable record of many aspects of Canada's naval war, it is also the legacy of an artist who found in the subject matter of battle an inspiration for paintings of some beauty. *Air Raid off Normandy* (10537) is a riot of flashing lights and colours, the bright activity in the night sky anchored by the motionless dark forms of the vessels below. Wood was a gifted artist who put his talents to the service of his country in war time. In so doing he made for himself a memorial in the form of his record of Canada's war at sea - one that will outlive any of us who read this. It is the record of a conflict seen and experienced by one man amongst many; but it is also a record that has been mediated by the creative spirit of the artist within the man, and in consequence has been transformed into a perspective that is unique.

Notes

1. T.C. Wood to H.O. McCurry, April 1944, National Gallery of Canada War Artist Files, T.C Wood.
2. Unattributed newspaper clipping, National Gallery of Canada War Artist Files, T.C. Wood
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Tom Wood to H.O. McCurry, January 1945, National Gallery of Canada Archives, War Artist Files, Tom Wood.

Laura Brandon is Chief, War Art at the Canadian War Museum.

Above:
Ammunition Storage Tunnel

Right:
Air Raid Off Normandy

