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Robert Fowler
bfowler@travel-net.com

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Valour at Sea

The Sinking of MV *Devis*, July 1943

T. Robert Fowler

On 19 June 1943, the first ships carrying the Canadian force for Operation 'Husky' sailed from the River Clyde. The men of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division and 1st Canadian Army Tank Brigade knew they were sailing toward the dangers of their first battle; but those on the Motor Vessel *Devis* did not realize that they would be the first to encounter enemy action, as a result of which three of their complement would receive decorations for gallantry.

The invasion force sailed in four convoys, with the combat units divided between the "Fast Assault Convoy" carrying the actual landing force and the "Slow Assault Convoy" carrying the follow-up troops. Support units and equipment not essential for the actual assault were in the last two convoys. The Slow Assault Convoy sailed first, its departure date timed to arrive off the invasion beaches with the Fast Convoy.

Once the sealed orders were opened at sea on 1 July and their destination revealed, many of the troops experienced a mixture of excitement and unease. Even the long sea voyage could give rise to anxiety in some men who had not joined the army to face the dangers of the open sea. As the war diarist of the division headquarters wrote: "Soon we will leave the comparative safety of the British Isles and sail into dangerous waters...[where we] will experience the slightly uncomfortable notion that we are exposed to the iniquity of a watery grave."¹

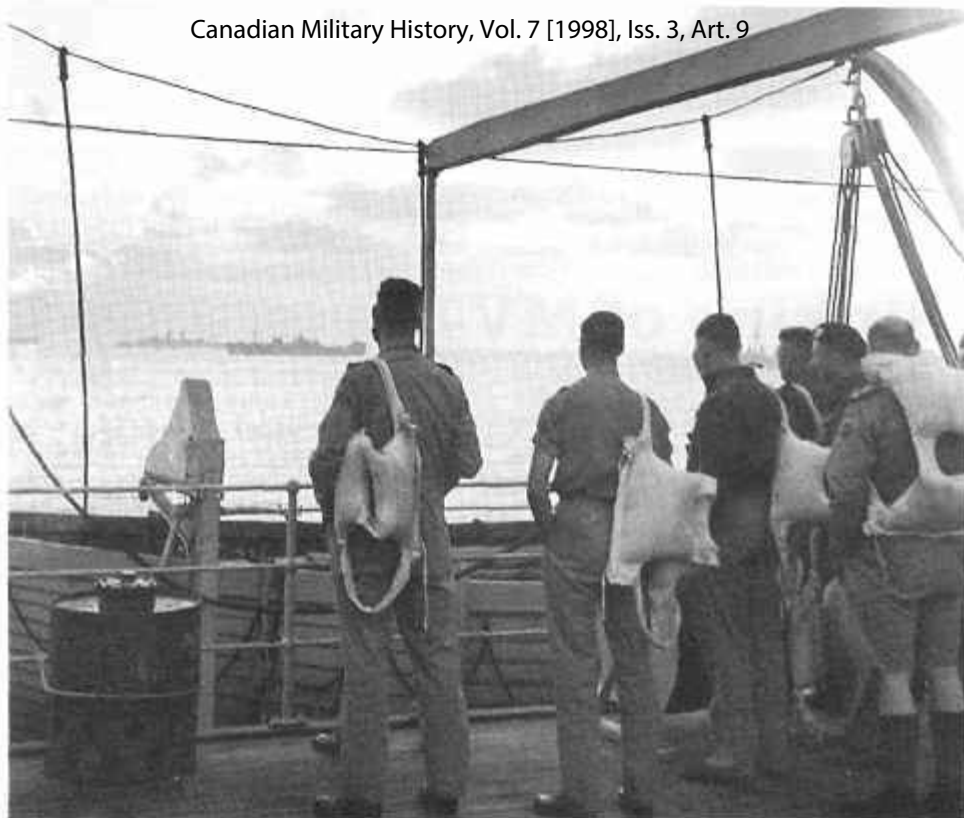
On 29 June, the Naval Operations Room reported that two U-Boat packs had been plotted about 200 miles directly ahead of the convoys. By the time the Fast Convoy was off the coast of

Portugal, submarines had been spotted lurking within a few miles of its course. The enemy held back attacking until the Slow Convoy had passed through the Strait of Gibraltar; then, on the night of 4-5 July, between Oran and Algiers, the Germans struck, sinking the transports *City of Venice* and *St. Essylt*. The loss of equipment was serious but fortunately there was little loss of life. The next day, however, a U-Boat moved in for a renewed attack.

The target selected this time was the MV *Devis*. Its main cargo included mechanical transport, heavy weapons and stores for the follow-up wave. Thus, the *Devis* carried 22 of the Division Headquarters' 26 motor transport vehicles, half of the division's 17-pounder anti-tank guns, some field artillery pieces and important signal equipment. On board, along with the Convoy's Commodore, were 35 British and 261 Canadian officers and men, including detachments from the Carleton and York, Royal 22e and 1st Anti-Tank Regiments.²

It was bright and sunny at 1545 hours on the afternoon of 5 July when the torpedo struck the *Devis* amidships. The explosion was violent and deadly. The fire it created set off petrol and ammunition in the hold, with the result that within minutes the fore part of the ship was cut off.³ Private D.L. Clarke of the Carleton and York Regiment was close to the point of impact:

I was in the hold on the second deck, directly behind the bridge when there was a loud explosion which threw me against a table and then to the deck. The first thing I remember was people walking over me. I got up and tried to get out by going towards the bow, but there was a sheet of flame which I could not go through...There was another explosion which



Lifeboat drill on board a ship in the convoy enroute to Sicily.

blew open the armoury door. This blew me back to the hammock rack and I looked around and saw men coming through the flames.⁴

The Officer Commanding Troops on the ship was Major Douglas Harkness, second-in-command of the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment. On the explosion, he rushed out of his cabin to find out what had happened. He later reported "the first thing I saw was the two rear wheels of a truck and the body of a man, which was on the deck just outside the door."⁵ Harkness gave orders for the troops to assemble at their boat stations and then turned his attention to the men who were trapped on the Mess Deck; their only escape was through the hatch above the men's quarters, blown open by the explosion. Three volunteers quickly joined him in his efforts - Armament Quartermaster Sergeant D.S. Milne of No.4 LAD and Privates O'Brien and Babcock of the Carleton and York. They searched about on the deck for some ropes and threw these down through the hatch to haul out the men below. Meanwhile, the situation began to deteriorate. The fire had reached five gun quads loaded with ammunition, setting off their 17-pounder shells. Despite this danger, the small group continued with their efforts, rescuing as many of the men from below as possible.

It soon became clear that the ship would have to be abandoned. According to the After Action Report:

the men, with two exceptions, behaved extremely well. They took their boat stations in an orderly manner and did not throw over the rafts or jump overboard until the order to abandon ship was given. In the meantime, they collected wounded and burned men, and took them overboard with them when they went.⁶

Two men, however, had become hysterical from fear of drowning and would not leave the ship. They were:

grasping the stanchions and screaming that they could not swim and would not leave. Armt. QMS Milne managed to disengage the grip of one man and forced him in to the water. At the risk of his own life, despite the fact that the stern had by this time sunk to the point that waves were washing over the deck and the fire in the hold increased in intensity, he remained to struggle with these men along with the OC Troops of the ship.⁷

Precious minutes passed as Harkness and Milne wrestled with the panic stricken men, finally throwing them overboard. Then, to their consternation, Harkness and Milne found that the first hysterical man had managed to climb back on deck, over the side which was now at

water level. After a further struggle, they were finally successful in forcing him into the water where rafts were already picking up the others.

The ship was now settling rapidly at the stern, with water rising on the deck. Only four men trying to free a large raft remained and Major Harkness ordered these last to leave the ship. He then turned and said to Milne, "Well Sergeant-Major, it's time for our bath" and then jumped in the water.⁸ The ship went down three minutes later.

While Major Harkness was ensuring that the evacuation was orderly in the aft part of the *Devis*, another officer was contributing to saving lives in the forward part. Here, Captain W.G. Wells of the Royal 22e Régiment was one of the last men remaining on board. In this area, 60 men were in the water, but not enough life-saving equipment was available. Despite the exploding ammunition, Captain Wells stayed on board long enough to launch two life rafts overboard, the first by himself and the second with the assistance of the Commodore's Staff Officer. As described in the recommendation for his decoration:

many of the men got hold of this raft and he was thus responsible for saving many lives. Captain Wells, who by this time was on a raft, gathered many of the men who were wounded. When the first rescue ship arrived, Captain Wells saw that the more seriously wounded were embarked first. When the second rescue ship arrived, he ordered everyone up and was himself the last man to get aboard.⁹

Twenty minutes after being hit, the bow of the *Devis* rose high in the air and the ship slid under the waves. Rescue boats began to pick up the survivors, but some men had to hang on to boards or rafts for almost two hours. Eventually, they were all transferred to a destroyer which carried them to Bougie, Tunisia, to receive medical care. As a result of the sinking of the *Devis*, 52 men were lost and over 40 wounded or injured.¹⁰

Courage has many definitions depending on the danger faced. A general hallmark of true courage, however, is the ability to act calmly and deliberately in a life threatening situation to save the lives of others. As noted by one author, "both fear and calmness are contagious. Thus, an example of calm behaviour under fire can have

Men on board a ship on the convoy to Sicily receiving instruction on the use of an Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun.





Douglas Harkness, photographed in 1945 when he was the Commanding Officer of the 5th Anti-Tank Regiment. In 1943, while a major with the 1st Anti-Tank Regiment, his heroic actions helped to save the lives of countless soldiers when the MV Devis was sunk by a U-Boat attack. He was awarded the George Medal for his valour.

a very powerful effect on group behaviour...Contrary to some initial presumptions, calmness rather than violent rage may therefore be more characteristic of the courageous act."¹¹

A sinking ship in the middle of the sea, raging fire and exploding ammunition would test any man's mettle; Major Harkness, Captain Wells and Armt. QMS Milne clearly acted courageously in this crisis. The leadership of Major Harkness, as OC Troops, was particularly significant according to testimonials later given by various survivors: "The OC Troops was talking to the men, quieting them and was cool and calm... Throughout Major Harkness showed a complete disregard for his own safety and it is my conviction that had it not been for his cool courage and leadership, the casualty list would have been much higher..."¹²

In March 1944, the *Canada Gazette* announced the award of the George Medal to Major Douglas S. Harkness,¹³ and the appointment of Captain Winston G. Wells and Armt. QMS David S. Milne as Members, the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

Notes

1. War Diary [WD], 1st Canadian Infantry Division, 28 June 1943, National Archives of Canada [NAC], Record Group [RG] 24, Vol.10878.
2. WD 1st Canadian Infantry Division, NAC RG 24, Vol.10878, 233C1.008(D1), 5 July 1943; G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1956), p.46.
3. 1st Anti-Tank Regiment Report on the Torpedoing of CCI (MV Devis) 17 July 1943, NAC RG 24, Vol.10917, 215C1.(D21)
4. Statements regarding the Sinking of the MV Devis, NAC RG24, Vol 10971, 239C1.(D21).
5. Daniel G. Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers: The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc, 1991), p.27.
6. 1st Anti-Tank Regiment Report, NAC RG 24, Vol. 19817.
7. Recommendation for the award of the Order of the British Empire, 5th Class, MBE to Armt. QMS David Stephen Milne. Directorate of History & Heritage [DHH], Department of National Defence, 713.065(D1).
8. Statement by D.S. Milne, NAC RG 24, Vol. 10917.
9. Recommendation for the award of the Order of the British Empire, 5th Class, MBE to Captain WG Wells, DHH, 713.065(D2).
10. DHH File 112.3H1005(D12); Nicholson p.46.
11. Douglas N. Walton, *Courage: A Philosophical Investigation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p.34.
12. NAC RG 24, Vol.10971, 239C1.(D21).
13. Douglas Harkness finished the war as Commanding Officer of the 5th Anti-Tank Regiment in the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Following the war, he was elected to Parliament as the Conservative Member for Calgary North and in 1960 became Minister of National Defence.

T. Robert Fowler lives in Ottawa and is the author of *Valour in the Victory Campaign: The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division Gallantry Awards, 1945* (1995).