



Lieutenant William Jeremiah Garnett, Royal Canadian Navy, 1909 - 1998

Extracts from letters sent home:

Royal Canadian Navy
July 4th 1942

Now for some very rapid and sketchy impressions of the R.C.N. They must necessarily be sketchy as we get a good deal of confidential information to which I cannot of course refer.

First impressions are on the whole decidedly favourable. The greatest pleasure is to be among men my own age again after the rather heavy and prolonged dose of females at Fairbridge. Quarters are excellent – four to a cabin with limited but quite adequate space for clothes etc. Food is even better and exceptionally well served. Class rooms at Kings are nice and roomy, but at the Gunnery School where we go for most of our lectures, they are small and overcrowded. Perhaps this condition will improve as things get organised.

We spend most of the first week brushing up on field-drill and general discipline but have now started on various types of gun-drill etc. and sandwich in a good deal of signalling during spare time. I find my reaction to things like Morse-lamp signalling slow by comparison with the younger crowd, most of whom have come straight from University, but hope that like the reading at Oxford, I shall speed up as I get more practice. It is all intensely interesting and the more I see of it the more I wish I had joined up earlier.

Royal Canadian Navy
July 14th 1942

It is no easy matter to absorb four years work in four months and I find it quite hard going. As you know I am no mechanic and the simple mechanism of a quick-firing gun looks like a timed cross-word puzzle to me from start to finish. As we don't have very long to become familiar with it I have to trust to luck. We have oral examinations every two or three days so we have to keep our wits about us, and I must say I find it intensely interesting.

Two very welcome changes from ordinary routine last week were a sailing race between four whalers and target practice with service rifles on a 200 yd. range.

The race between the whalers took place in a sheltered bay a few hundred yards from our front door. We had six to a crew (more than necessary) and sailed a ½ mile course up and back. Our Crew came in last both times, although in both cases we might have been second with a little luck.

The day is a long one 6.30am to 6.00pm a daily routine followed by lectures or study period in the evening till 9.30p.m. That is as it should be, we can't afford to lose any time in this war.

H.M.C.S. Kings
Sept. 11th 1942

Another sub. and myself are here for the weekend having finished up our signal course on Saturday. I don't know the result of the exam yet but am pretty sure I got through all right. "Y" division graduated yesterday so that we, "Z", are now the senior division with only five weeks to go. During that time we have "Torpedoes", three or four days at sea learning how to get boats away etc. and a week on special Anti-Submarine tactics, then away we go. I shall be bitterly disappointed if I don't get to sea and think there is quite a chance that I may get over to Scotland with the remote possibility of enough leave to get down to Devon. Don't count on anything though.

H.M.C.S. "Kings"
C/O F.M.O.
Halifax N.S.
Oct. 11th 1942

I have tried to wangle the information (which the staff offices already have) about my appointment by every conceivable means but they are being more than usually adamant and it is not likely that I shall hear before the official announcement comes out on Friday. I had reason to hope that I might be getting over last week but now the latest "buzz" (slang for rumour) is that nobody from our division is going over. It seems that the time has come for a number of divisional officers to be relieved at the various land stations across the country so I may get one of these. I shall be bitterly disappointed if I don't get to sea.

H.M.C.S. Kings
C/O F.M.O.
Halifax N.S.
October 14th 1942

I have been placed on loan to the Royal Navy (I think for a minimum period of two years if the war lasts that long) and expect to join my ship on Saturday or shortly afterwards. I don't know where the ship is yet or where it will be going nor could I tell you if I did know, but the fact that it is an H.M.S. and not an H.M.C.S. makes the chances of getting over some time before very long a distinct possibility.

H.M.C.S. Timmins
C/O F.M.O. Halifax
Nov. 17th 1942

my appointment to the R.N. ship had been cancelled. After going all the way to Ontario I had to come back to the East coast again, arrived late at night, reported first thing next morning and sailed within the hour. Exciting but wearing!

...

Most of the crew of this ship are west coasters which makes it nice and I am enjoying it, although it is deadly boring at times. I have a lot of odd jobs to do and the novelty of them makes them interesting, but I am quite sure I would not like this sort of life for too long.

I wish I could describe some of our activities to you but I shall have to wait till after the war.

C/O F.M.O.
Halifax N.S.
January 1943

From now on please do not expect any date or any address other than the above on my letters. Nor shall I be able to give you much news except of a very general nature. It seems that quite a lot of information is leaking out about ship movements, so we must avoid giving them any clue whatsoever.

We had a very routine Christmas at sea with no celebration whatsoever. We had stored up turkeys for the occasion, but the weather was so rough we decided to wait until we got ashore and could eat them in comfort. As it happened Christmas Day was beautifully calm and still, so we could have had them after all. Apart from the lack of celebration, however, the calm weather was the best Christmas present we could wish for. I don't mind the rough weather on deck, because you are properly clothed for it and the wind is exhilarating, but down below in confined quarters with the food bouncing off the table every time the ship rolls, and an even chance of being thrown out of one's bunk when we hit a big one, I can think of nothing more uncomfortable.

I was Gunnery Officer on my last ship (relieving for somebody on leave) and also standing a watch by myself for the first time. When you are Officer of the Watch you are for four hours completely responsible for the whole ship, give all the orders on the bridge etc. It is good fun and far more interesting than watching somebody else do it. The captain of course is always on call but usually stays down below in his cabin unless something important is happening.

It gives you a queer sensation being on the bridge at night. The bosun's mate calls you twenty minutes before you are due to go on watch to give you time to dress and get your eyes accustomed to the darkness. The Officer you are relieving then gives you the ship's course, position and speed and the relative position of the convoy and you take over. At first everything seems pitch black. You can only just see the shapes of the lookouts and the signalman, never mind any ships in the vicinity. Even at the slowest speed at night the ship seems to be rushing through the darkness because you only hear the sound of the wind in the rigging and the surge of the wash without distinguishing any movement. Then gradually your eyes get accustomed to the dark and you pick up the silhouettes of the ships in the convoy against the horizon. All the time you are giving orders to the man at the wheel to keep the ship zig-zagging this way and that. It is of course essential to have a mental picture of exactly what course you are steering in

relation to the convoy course, otherwise you might lose them completely or bump into them. This keeps you constantly on the alert.

C/O Fleet Mail Office
Halifax
October 1943

I feel a little bit like a fish out of water today. My ship has departed without me and though I have wanted this opportunity for a long time, as you know, I feel rather as though I had deliberately deserted her. It is absurd how attached one gets to the intangible "personality" of a ship, in spite of the disagreeable side of ships life about which I let off so much steam last week.

On the other hand it is a great relief to come ashore for a little while, sleep in a motionless bed, bathe in a motionless bath and above all put on clean clothes in the morning!

H.M.C.S. TIMMINS
C/O Fleet Mail Office
Halifax
November 1943

I should not write to you in the mood I am in at the moment but I can't settle to anything else and it will help me to let off a little steam.

What is annoying me most at the moment is the inability to get any action taken on a single one of the requests I have put in to get transferred to England, or the R.N, or ships operating to and from the U.K. The Manning Commander knows exactly how I feel about it, but I see Officer after Officer getting the sort of appointment I want and not one of them has had any sea experience whatsoever, whereas I have completed a full year now continuously at sea – except for leave. I know I can't expect them to make me a special case, but it seems such an easy thing to arrange and very little trouble to anybody.

On top of this irritation is another which is if anything even worse. I used to enjoy the company on this ship and every voyage was a pleasure in spite of the weather, but all the Officers including myself have developed a great dislike for the Captain. He is young by comparison with the others we have had, very conceited and loves throwing his weight about. The result is a crew constantly on edge, and in the wardroom, meal after meal eaten in dull silence. It is enough to make anyone weep.

January 1st 1945
H.M.C.S. Long Branch
C/O. F.M.O.
St. John's Nfld.

We had great fun on Christmas Day – somewhere in the Atlantic. Luckily it was warm and sunny, so we dressed up a fat signalman as Father Christmas and went round all the ships of our group delivering foolish presents and "wisecracking" over the loud-hailer. The mess decks were all decorated and after a very good Christmas service we distributed the ditty bags and generally relaxed except of course the watch on duty. In the evening I put on a quiz-programme over the ship's loud speaker system with questions ranging from current affairs to nursery rhymes. Everybody seemed to get a kick out of it.

Bill Garnett served on HMCS Kings (42), then HMCS Timmins(42/43); HMS Postillon (43-end 44); HMCS Long Branch (44-45); and finally HMCS Peregrine.

There are two stories which are so vivid in his son's head - but about which neither of his brothers have any recollection! - that he doesn't know whether they are true or not.

One involves a convoy out of Halifax having to turn back because of terrible weather conditions. The Captain in his destroyer ordered full speed ahead and retired to his cabin, whereupon the destroyer cut through one enormous wave, and took the next full on the bridge, killing all there

and the 'Captain' in his cabin - while the corvettes waddled their way up and down each wave and made their way safely to port.

The second involves a ship in a convoy from England being torpedoed. My father noticed a strange smell (like rotting hay) and observed that the ship's crew were rowing towards the corvette in a wavy, rather than a straight line. They all died on board the corvette - the men not being aware that they were carrying mustard gas and had escaped through the leaking gas. The details are clear in his son's head - but he doesn't know if they are true or not because there's no mention of them in the letters!

Brief biography and naval record

Born: Bolton (UK) 1909 Parents part owners of Cotton mill

1926: Cotton collapsed; Bill sent to Canada to learn about agriculture

1927-32: Bill worked his way through the Guelph Agricultural College

1932: awarded the first-ever agricultural Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, UK. Having no money, he worked a passage from Fort Churchill to Europe on the grain-carrier SS Walton

1933-36: at Oxford University

1936-38; worked for the Hudson Bay Company in Winnipeg

1938-42: Assistant Principal, Fairbridge Farm School, Cowichan Valley, Vancouver Island

1942-45: RCN

1945-49: Principal, FFS, Vancouver Island

1949-70: Principal, Norfolk School of Agriculture, UK

Died: Dundee, Scotland 1998

Naval Service, RCN

Enlisted: 8 May 1942

Regimental Number: 0-26270

Rank on enlistment: Sub-Lieutenant Promoted to Lieutenant 8 June 1943

Gunnery Officer, 27 October 1942 – 5 November 1943;

Navigating and Radar Officer, 22 November 1943 – 14 March 1944;

Navigating Officer and 1st Lieutenant, 14 March 1944 – 24 February 1945; Assistant Demobilization Officer, 12 March 1945 – 15 June 1945

Date of Discharge: 15 June 1945

Ships served on:

HMCS Timmins: 27 October 1942- 5 November 1943 (Flower Class 1940 – 1941)

HMS Postillion: 22 November 1943 - 4 March 1944

HMCS Long Branch: 14 March 1944 – 24 February 1945 (Revised Flower Class 1943 - 1944 I.E. Ex RN)

HMCS Peregrine: 12 March 1945 – 15 June 1945

Married 3rd Officer Jo Livingstone, WRNS, on 17 May 1945 on Vancouver Island