

## John's story - Part Two – 1943 - Life as a RN DEMS



After passing out as a Royal Navy DEMS Gunner John went to Devonport where further training was given whilst waiting for his first drafting on a Merchant Ship.

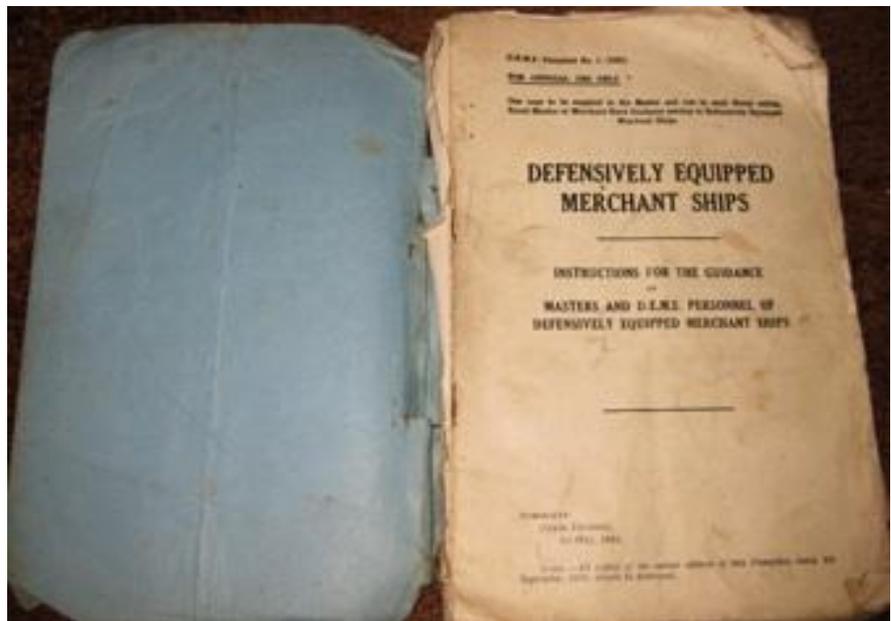
The merchant ships travelled across the Atlantic Ocean in convoys - often 14 strong.

So many ships and personnel had been sunk in the Battle of the Atlantic that without help from our Allies in America and Canada all would have been lost.



As an island, it was vital for Britain's survival to keep the link across the Atlantic for essential supplies such as food, raw materials, troops and their equipment plus the replenishment of our ships.

Hilter's plan was to starve Britain into submission - and in early 1943 British supplies – especially of oil were running out.



Massive shipbuilding was being carried out - both in Britain and across the Atlantic - in America and Canada in a race to replace those ships which were being lost on a daily basis.

Most new British merchants ships built at this time had the prefix **Empire** added to their name. Thousands of **Liberty** ships came from American shipyards with the prefix **Sam**, while Canadian ships were known as the **Parks** and **Fort** ships.

U-boats were sinking our merchant ships at an alarming rate but by May 1943 it became apparent that with the introduction of new technology such as radar and the ability to break the Enigma codes the discovery of the u-boats was greatly facilitated and the enemy soon realised that their u-boats were no longer making an impact.

John's first drafting in 1943 was to Canada was on ss **BELGIAN CAPTAIN** - shown in this photo taken by John in Canada in August 1943



John Gardiner's Navy Service - WW2 - 1942 - 1946 – Part Two

Research<sup>1</sup> shows that the **ss Belgian Captain** - a 7,041 GRT (*Gross Register Tonnage*) cargo ship - was built in 1942 in West Hartlepool named as **Empire Centaur** for the Ministry of War Transport (MoWT).

In 1943 the **Empire Centaur** was allocated to the Belgian Government, renamed **ss Belgian Captain** and placed under the management of Agence Maritime SA.



The ship then became a member of a number of convoys several of which John sailed with during 1943.

Here is John with a fellow crew mate (*maybe a Merchant Seaman or a stoker*) on board the **ss Belgian Captain** in Quebec in August 1943.

John visited at least 3 places in Canada - Halifax, Nova Scotia, St John, New Brunswick and Quebec as he has photos and mementos of his time there.

The felt flag banners (*right*) bought from the three places he visited. The one for Quebec shows the Montgomery Falls. The American Flag is seen on another Banner amongst his possessions.



This post card on the left from Saint John states:



Magic 'Electric Eye' Doors say "Welcome" is the word at Robbins Eastern Canada's most modern drug store.

The address at the bottom is given as 17 Charlotte Street, Saint John, New Brunswick.

<sup>1</sup> on the Wikipedia Website

From information shown on the Wikipedia Website the convoys that are thought to have included ss Belgian Captain are shown below. It is not known whether John sailed on all of them but he certainly was on some of them.

**Convoy Number: ON 177 4 April 1943** from Cardiff to New York bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia carrying coal

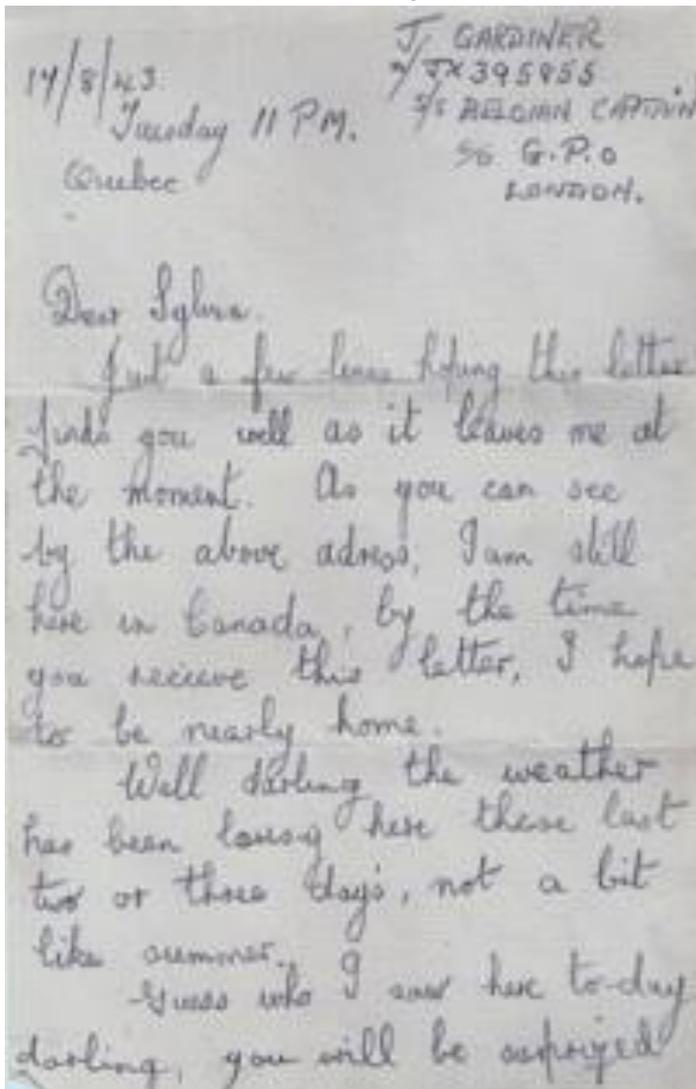
**Belgian Captain sailed 27 May 1943** from Halifax, Nova Scotia joining the convoy at sea on **29 May 1943**.

**Convoy Number: ON 192 8 July 1943** from Milford Haven to New York bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia

**Convoy No: HX 254 27 August 1943** from New York to Liverpool arriving **12 September 1943** carrying steel and lumber bound for Sunderland.

**Convoy No: ON 206 11 October 1943** from Liverpool to New York

Whilst in Canada John was fortunate to witness the meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt when Churchill went to Quebec in August 1943 to the First Quebec Conference. It was a very exciting historical



14/8/43.  
Tuesday 11 P.M.  
Quebec

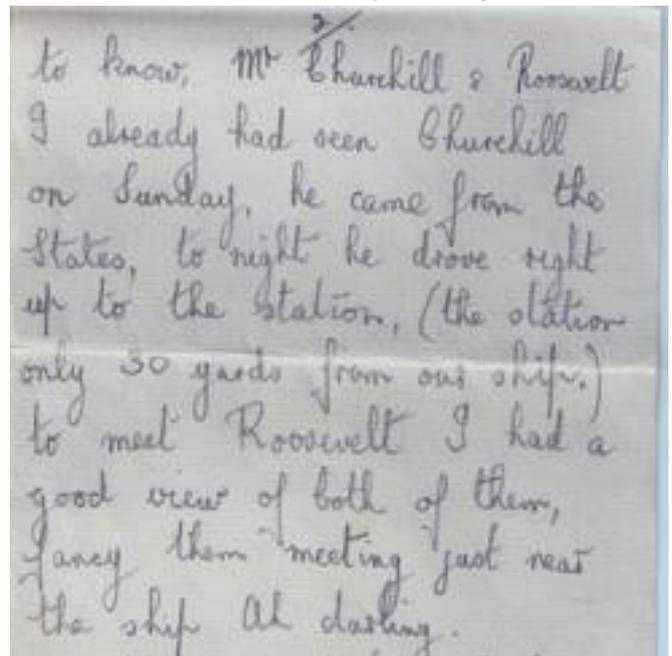
J. GARDINER  
FX 395955  
SS BELGIAN CAPTAIN  
56 G.P.O  
LONDON.

Dear Sylvia.

Just a few lines hoping this letter finds you well as it leaves me at the moment. As you can see by the above address, I am still here in Canada, by the time you receive this letter, I hope to be nearly home.

Well speaking the weather has been lousy here these last two or three days, not a bit like summer.

-Guess who I saw here to-day darling, you will be surprised



to know, Mr <sup>2</sup> Churchill & Roosevelt I already had seen Churchill on Sunday, he came from the States, to night he drove right up to the station, (the station only 50 yards from our ship.) to meet Roosevelt I had a good view of both of them, fancy them meeting just near the ship at last.

moment to witness and it remained a special moment in John's life.

During his stay in Quebec John became friendly with a Canadian family – the Raymond family - with whom he is thought to have lodged with during this time. The family treated John like one of the family.

John's Mother continued to write to the family after the war only sadly to lose touch as the years went by.

John Gardiner's Navy Service - WW2 - 1942 - 1946 - Part Two



The Raymond Family



This photo was taken by the St Lawrence River



*John Gardiner's Navy Service - WW2 - 1942 - 1946*

On 22 September 1943 John was on home leave as we have these photos of him taken with his sweetheart, Sylvia (also known as Rum) and his Mother in the garden of her home at 55 Pembury Road, Bexleyheath



John reluctantly said goodbye again to his loved ones at home and headed back to his ship. At the end of the year he was due to go to the Eastern Mediterranean and he was unaware at this time that his next home leave would not be for 15 months.

Sylvia used to go to see his family every Sunday evening where the gramophone would be playing all the wonderful songs popular at the time and although John was far away she felt close to him being with his family.

During his next Mission John's ship made its way passed Gibraltar en route for the Mediterranean. On 2/3 December 1943 John was off of the Bari coast in Italy.

What John witnessed at Bari stayed with him all his life he never really got over the shock of it. The atrocities by the enemy were named 'the 2nd Pearl Harbour'. 17 ships were destroyed by the enemy and 1,000 men killed.

To witness the dreadful destruction and to see so many bodies of men and boys floating on the sea knowing that there was nothing you could do to help them was an unforgettable sight - one that haunted John throughout his life. He never forgot it. How could anyone ever be the same after witnessing such an event.

This was the true atrocity of war. The memory of that sight could never be distinguished from those that witnessed it knowing that so many lives had been taken in such a short space of time and that they would never return home to their families. It was a sobering thought as Christmas approached. No training could ever have prepared him or anyone else for the awful sights they were to witness during their time in the Navy.