

**Tuesday, November 1, 2005**

**Rear Admiral Desmond Piers Crost The Bar at 92**

Chester, Nova Scotia - Rear Admiral Desmond William (Debby) Piers (RCN-Ret'd) has died at the age of 92. Piers was born in Halifax on June 12, 1913, and raised in Chester. He enrolled as a cadet in the Royal Military College of Canada in 1930, took summer training in Halifax and entered the Royal Canadian Navy in September 1932, the first RMC ex-cadet to do so.

It was still a custom to send potential officers to train with the Royal Navy, and Piers attended the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, and trained on British ships, before returning to Halifax in 1937. He was posted as a first lieutenant at Base Esquimalt, on the Canadian destroyer HMCS Restigouche (aka Rusty Guts). In September 1939, Restigouche was ordered to Halifax and at the start of the war assigned to convoy duty to escort merchant ships to England. At that time the RCN had only six destroyers and 3,500 men. Piers was always close to the action. He was present when the Royal Canadian Navy fired its first shots in World War II. In June 1940, during the evacuation of France, German General Erwin Rommel was bearing down on the British Army's 51st Highland Division at St. Valérie on the Channel coast near Dieppe. Restigouche was ordered to take off wounded soldiers, and Piers went ashore in a whaler to find out what could be done to evacuate the stranded Scottish soldiers. The General of the Highlanders, General V.M. Fortune, told him the troops would not leave because they had no orders to do so. As Piers was returning to Restigouche, the Germans fired on him. Capt. Harry Dewolfe returned fire to protect his young officer. "Here were these Scottish troops without arms, without food. Harry Dewolfe, in the meantime, was firing at the German army on the cliffs," Piers recalled years later in an interview with CBC Radio. In June of 1941, the RCN promoted the 28 year old Piers to Lieutenant-Commander and gave him the helm of HMCS Restigouche. In August, he escorted the British Battleship HMS Prince of Wales, with Winston Churchill aboard, to Argentia Newfoundland, for WSC's secret Atlantic Charter meetings with Franklin D. Roosevelt.

For the next two years, he led merchant convoys across the submarine-infested North Atlantic to Europe, hunting the wolf packs of U-boats that were wreaking havoc on Allied shipping. In one 1942 "convoy from hell," he led 42 ships across the Atlantic with only four small corvettes as protection. West of Iceland, in a desperate three day battle with 17 German submarines, C-4 escort group lost 15 of the merchant ships. Piers was furious at the lack of training, and the use of obsolete equipment on Canadian ships, and in June 1943, he wrote a controversial yet influential report to Rear Admiral Leonard Murray on the deficiencies of the convoy system, and many problems were fixed. In 1944, Piers took command of a new destroyer, HMCS Algonquin, as part of the 26th Destroyer Flotilla of the British home fleet. In March of that year he escorted a huge aircraft strike against the German battleship Tirpitz from Scapa Flow, and the following month saw action off Norway. At the end of May, 1944, Algonquin

sailed into the English Channel to support the Normandy invasion. The ship escorted landing craft and gave direct fire support to members of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division, which pushed far into enemy territory on D-Day. Piers recalled the day: "Before dawn we could hear aircraft from Britain carrying paratroopers across the Channel. The daylight came and the sky was filled with bombers and fighters, and before us was France, with all these landing craft streaming towards it.... We had the advantage of knowing the setup on the beach from previous missions... The battle line extended 20 miles to our west... It was quite a scene... Behind us were thousands upon thousands of troops waiting to come ashore." Piers was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. In part, the citation with the medal reads: "He has by his vigorous leadership and aggressive attack been an inspiration to those under his command." He was also inducted into France's Legion d'Honneur in 2004 to mark the D-Day anniversary.

After the war, Piers joined the training staff at HMCS Cornwallis, and served in key positions such as executive officer on HMCS Magnificent (1947-48), commander of HMCS Quebec (1955). He was promoted to Commodore, and became senior Canadian officer afloat (Atlantic) and assistant chief of naval staff, and later director of naval plans and operations. In 1957, he became commandant of the Royal Military College and assistant chief of Canadian defence liaison staff in Washington (1960-62). He became a rear admiral in 1962 and retired in June, 1967, after 35 years of service. He was agent general for Nova Scotia in the United Kingdom and Europe (1977-79) and continued to volunteer actively during his retirement. In a news release, Vice-Admiral Bruce Mac-Lean, chief of Maritime staff and commander of the Canadian navy, said that Mr. Piers's death marks the end of an era for the navy. "He was a heroic man whose contributions to the navy are unparalleled," he said. "He will forever be remembered as one of our finest."

Piers had a great zest for life. At the Battle of the Atlantic dinner aboard HMCS Sackville in 2003, the 89-year-old Piers jumped to his feet, pulled a harmonica out of his pocket and joyfully began playing it and dancing. "It was the most amazing thing I think I've ever seen," said Michael Whitby, senior naval historian with the Defence Department. "After a wonderful supper, Debby Piers got up and all these guys sang naval songs... and he led them all. It was just delightful and the whole crowd was just enamoured by this." "This magnetism that this man had, this charm... he had a wonderful sense of humour," Mr. Whitby said. But he was also "a very inspiring leader... It's this can-do attitude. It goes back to him in the Battle of the Atlantic. He was a very inexperienced officer but he had pretty good professional training... He just got the job done. He found a way to get it done and the navy's very much like that today... In my mind he's the prototypical destroyer man, full of dash and confidence, and a really good small-ship leader."

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SOURCE: Halifax Herald, CBC, CanWest (author unknown.)