



R-ADM DESMOND PIERS AS HONOURARY PRESIDENT



This short biography on R-Admiral Desmond Piers was developed by the South Shore Naval Association (Blockhouse, Nova Scotia) when they installed Admiral Piers as their honorary president at their annual mess dinner on April 20th 2001. This article was submitted by Jerry Sigrist and is used with permission.

Rear Admiral Desmond William Piers DSC, CM, CD,D.sc.Mil, Klj, RCN (Ret'd)

Admiral "Debby" Piers was born in Halifax on 12 June, 1913, a member of one of the city's founding families, and was educated at the Halifax County Academy and the Royal Military College of Canada.

He joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1932 as the first ex-cadet of the RMC to enter that service. From 1932 to 1937 Admiral Piers served as a Cadet, Midshipman, and Sub-Lieutenant in the training system of the Royal Navy aboard British warships. After university and technical courses at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and Portsmouth, he returned to Canada to serve in destroyers of the Royal Canadian Navy.

The outbreak of World War Two found him serving as the First Lieutenant (X.O.) of the destroyer HMCS RESTIGOUCHE. RESTIGOUCHE had been called from the west coast for duty in the Caribbean and sailed with OTTAWA on November 15, 1939, reaching Kingston Jamaica via the Panama Canal on November 29. It was then realized RESTIGOUCHE would be required for convoy duties and was ordered to Halifax. After only 48 hours in Halifax she was at sea again leading Canada's first troopships to the U.K. She remained on these duties until May 1940.

On May 24, 1940, RESTIGOUCHE 's ships company was recalled from leave in Halifax after only three days in between convoys, and ordered to sail for U.K. waters - they didn't return for over a year. In June of 1940 during the evacuation of France, RESTIGOUCHE, under the command of LCDR Horatio Nelson Lay with LT. Debby Piers as 1st LT. was taking off wounded from St. Valery near Dieppe when they were ordered to assist in the evacuation of the 51st Highland Division fighting under General Fortune. At St. Valery en Caux they found no Highlanders. What to do? LCDR Lay asked his 1st Lt. Piers to send someone ashore to get in touch with the General and the Highlanders. LT. Piers went to his cabin, looked in the mirror and said "Piers, you're the one who's going ashore." and replied, "Aye Aye, Sir." Packing binoculars, a signal lamp, chocolate bars, a bottle of whiskey, and sundry other appropriate items in his golf bag, he reported to the Captain. "Any other orders, Sir? I'm off ashore." "You going yourself, you bloody fool?" "Yes I am." "Okay, find out what's going on and signal it back." Debby went ashore and found the General Commanding the 51st Highland Division, but he was

holding, a flank and declined the invitation to embark. He wished to hold the perimeter to allow more soldiers to get off. The General and his troops became surrounded by Rommels ranger division, was captured, and ended up spending four years in a P.O.W. camp.

Meanwhile back in RESTIGOUCHE, Piers' info was received by light and as he could not persuade the General to leave, he decided to return. His boat had damaged its propeller and he could only make a half knot, so LCDR Lay took RESTIGOUCHE inshore for him. The boat was hoisted just as panzer tanks appeared at the top of the cliff and opened fire. Shells came rushing overhead. Harry DeWoIfe in ST. LAURENT opened up with his 4.7 inch guns - the first Canadian ship to fire on the enemy in WW II. RESTIGOUCHE then fired at the Germans on the cliff. The German guns straddled the ship again and again and, as Piers went to the bridge to report, the ship was doing 32 knots and zig-zagging out of there. "Well, number one, what's it all about ?" "No excitement ?" Debby told the story as shrapnel whizzed overhead. Later he said, " I was ducking and there was the Captain with his steel helmet on just sitting there as if nothing was happening at all, just an afternoon picnic." Some 38 years later while being interviewed, Nelson Lay said, " I noticed the OOW and Yeoman and the others were ducking down behind the canvas wind dodgers. This struck me as absurd and I started to laugh. Canvas is no protection against a 3 - inch shell, in any case when you heard the shell it was past."

On June 24th after the controversial sinking of FRASER by HMS CALCUTTA, she sliced FRASER in two, RESTIGOUCHE was left behind to do rescue work and sink what was left of FRASER. Four Officers and 104 men were saved, but 47 Canadians and 19 RN sailors were lost including one sailor from RESTIGOUCHE when a boat was swamped.

The remainder of 1940 was spent under Western Approaches Command and Northern Escort Force working with the RN. RESTIGOUCHE left Liverpool at the end of August 1940 for a brief refit at Halifax returning to the U.K. in January 1941. She had a satisfactory record for the first Canadian ship to return home from British waters. Since the war began, she had steamed 26,181 miles and fought off a score of air and submarine attacks.

On June 24, 1941 a newly promoted LCDR Piers was now in command of the RESTIGOUCHE and he would remain with her until June 5, 1943. Also in June 1941 RESTIGOUCHE was allocated to Newfoundland Command and toiled ceaselessly as a mid-ocean escort. On many occasions Piers acted as escort commander during his many trips escorting convoys from Newfoundland to the U.K. One of these convoys was the ill fated SC-107.

Convoy SC 107 was made up of 422 ships escorted by C4, one destroyer,

RESTIGOUCHE, and supposedly six corvettes. The escorts were formed in an ad hoc group because two regulars couldn't sail due to defects. Flag Officer Newfoundland then allocated corvettes REGINA and ALGOMA to C4. REGINA broke down and returned to St. John's. MOOSE JAW sailed in her place but couldn't catch up until late November 2nd, HMS WALKER stayed briefly, but had radio problems and couldn't communicate so she departed October 31st. Only RESTIGOUCHE had HF/DF because Piers had scrounged one earlier. The corvettes were fitted with unreliable short range radar and the ASDIC range of all ships was no more than 1500 yards. Now with only four corvettes Piers had to solve the problem of finding and driving off U-Boats before they could attack. To make matters worse, two of these corvettes had changed Captains just prior to sailing. They were intercepted while still west of Cape Race and no less than 17 U-Boats were directed to attack. One was sunk by the RCAF early in the battle and Piers used his HF/DF to sweep aggressively around the convoy driving off shadows early in the battle. The escort, C4 was overwhelmed. Eight ships went down in the first furious night of battle, seven more followed before it ended nearly a week later. It was a devastating blow but Piers had fought a tremendous battle against 17 U-Boats with a wretchedly inferior escort.

As usual British criticism was harsh, they believed the RCN had expanded too rapidly, taken on too many tasks, and was simply too poorly trained and led to operate effectively. Admiral Nelles immediately mounted a campaign to prove them wrong. CinC Western Approaches couldn't find much to criticize Piers about, except his youth and inexperience. Young, yes, but Piers was experienced in the North Atlantic, He'd been out there for three years.

The only RCN ship to get HF/DF before late 1942 was RESTIGOUCHE and she only had it because her Captain LCDR Debby Piers scrounged a set quite illegally from the U. S. Navy base in Londonderry N.I. Staff in Ottawa hadn't understood what HF/DF was about. The Director of Communications CDR. Worth said it wasn't properly proven and put it off. He should have listened to his men at sea. Piers' intelligent use of his HF/DF was to save a convoy from total loss in June, his POTELE "Snakey" Ellis intercepted U-Boat sighting transmissions time and again.

On December 12, 1941, RESTIGOUCHE sailed from Hvalfjord Iceland to rendezvous with convoy ON-44 en-route to Halifax and viewed a prospect of being home for Christmas. They sailed into a driving snowstorm and a full gale. The convoy was not found, and the gale increased rising to hurricane force the next day. The ship was severely damaged, heavy seas broke the fore mast, sprung plates and flooded many compartments. The ship had to be brought about and a decision was made to run for the Clyde. Two oil tanks leaked salt water and much serious damage was done. Extensive repairs were carried out at Greenock, they did not get home for Christmas that year.

In 1943 the young veteran Captain of RESTIGOUCHE LCDR. Piers knew that junior

officers, even very experienced ones, got no thanks for criticizing their seniors. Still, he put the bitterness of the mid-ocean Canadians on paper and sent it up the line in June. His points - RCN ships were 12 to 18 months astern of the RN in anti-submarine warfare equipment. Admiral Max Horton's staff wasn't happy with Canadian's performance, CMDRE (D) Londonderry agreed they were poorly equipped, home leave and regular mail were big problems, working up periods were too short, pulling people from ships destroyed efficiency and there were too many gaps in training. Admiral Murray agreed with Piers - the ships were just getting in decent shape to fight the battles of a year before. His report arrived in a Headquarters that was as poorly equipped for the battles of 1943 as were the ships at sea.

In 1943 Debby was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for vigorous service at sea in the Battle of the Atlantic. During this period his ship escorted the battleship PRINCE OF WALES to Argentia Bay in Newfoundland where Churchill and Roosevelt met to formulate the Atlantic CHARTER.

LCDR Piers left RESTIGOUCHE in June 1943 and, while awaiting the completion of HMCS ALGONQUIN in Glasgow, being Captain designate, was employed as Training Officer in Halifax. During this time it was discovered that a group of prisoners of war in a camp near Bowmanville, Ontario were planning an escape and were to be picked up by a U-Boat in the Bay of Chaleur. A mass escape via a tunnel was foiled but one officer, Wolfgang Heyda, slipped away and made it to the rendezvous by train. However, the plan had been uncovered by searching mail, and a party, under the ubiquitous LCDR Piers, was waiting on the spot, complete with radio, portable radar and a cordon of 10 ships flung across the bay. The aim was to capture the rescue boat. U-536 slipped in and quietly awaited off the appointed spot right on time. Heyda was hauled in by Piers' party from the beach but the U-Boat twigged to the ship activity and crept away.

In February 1944 two RN V-class destroyers commissioned into the RCN as HMCS ALGONQUIN and SIOUX and joined the Home Fleet's 26th Flotilla. LCDR Debby Piers joined ALGONQUIN as her first Captain. Most of the ship's company had a lot of North Atlantic experience, but it was a far cry from Senior Officer of slow moving convoys to a small cog in a huge high-speed striking fleet. At the end of March he joined a massive TIRPITZ strike with two fleet carriers and four escort carriers. ALGONQUIN acted as support and became involved in helping rescue the Canadian manned carrier NABOB when she was torpedoed. 200 men were transferred to ALGONQUIN who later transferred them to another ship and returned to the scene of operations.

D-Day, June 6th, 1944 the greatest armada in history came up against the channel coast of France to pour great armies ashore for the liberation of Europe. The RCN was there in force. To ALGONQUIN and Piers went the honour of convoying and protecting the central headquarters ships. She was allocated lane 7 and lay offshore from where she knocked out many gun batteries on the beaches as well as buildings hiding defenders.

Operation Counterblast was mounted in November 1944 to destroy German shipping operating off the Norwegian coast. Force 2 comprised of two RN cruisers, three RN destroyers and ALGONQUIN approached the SW tip of Norway. Several ships were detected by radar and starshells were fired. ALGONQUIN opened fire on a minesweeper and hit her with the first salvo. M416 blew up and sank, M427 was so badly damaged she was driven ashore, capsized and sank. Piers report of proceedings noted the excellent on-board communications and plotting throughout the action, as well as accurate and efficient gunnery. The Force arrived back in Scapa with no injured.

New Years 1944-45 found ALGONQUIN fighting mountainous seas and U-Boats on her way to Russia. After a layover in Murmansk she returned to Halifax to get ready for the Pacific war. LCDR Piers turned ALGONQUIN over to her new Captain LCDR P.E. Haddon RCN on April 20th. 1945 and the war with Germany came to an official end on VE Day on May 8th 1945. He had served 63 months at sea during a war which lasted 68 months.

After the sinking of HMCS ESQUIMALT by U-190 on April 16th, 1945 a board of enquiry was convened, presided over by LCDR Piers. The findings of the board were criticized by NSHQ in Ottawa. The main reason was that the board managed to uncover a muted litany of neglect whose roots, even as late as 1945, derived in large measures from Canada's pre-war policies of a national unpreparedness, shortcomings in equipment, tactics, training, command and control in ESQUIMALT as well as hinting at a generality of problems in the fleet. Once again Debby Piers in his own way, informed higher authority of their shortcomings which they did not want to hear and, once again, they did not like it.

Throughout 1947 the now CDR. Piers was in Belfast Northern Ireland as Senior Officer standing by the construction of the carrier MAGNIFICENT, becoming Executive Officer when the ship commissioned in April 1948. During this period he took a flying course and was granted a civilian "A" license. In early 1949 there were several "incidents" happening in the RCN which caused some concern resulting in the Mainguy Report.

After flying-stations one Sunday, 32 of MAGNIFICENT's aircraft handlers stayed in their mess deck rather than falling in. Their complaints were mainly about upset routines, and they targeted the X.O. Piers was an Officer with plenty of hard fighting sea time in command of destroyers. A carrier is a complex organism, very different from a destroyer, it needs a lot of intricate co-ordination and co-operation between aviators, operations staff, seamen and engineers. An X.O.'s job is much different from that of a Captain, Piers' leadership was the arbitrary kind. Everyone was careful to avoid the dreaded word "mutiny" so it was put down as an incident. The

Captain interviewed them all and there were no charges laid.

In 1949 Piers took up his first appointment at Naval Headquarters in Ottawa as the Director of Naval Plans and Operations. After attending the National Defence College of Canada he was appointed Assistant Chief for Personnel and Administration on the naval staff of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic in Norfolk Virginia.

In 1955 Debby returned to sea again as Commanding Officer of the training cruiser QUEBEC, and later as Commander First Escort Squadron and Captain of ALGONQUIN. He also claimed the title of Senior Canadian Officer Afloat Atlantic, in command of all operational ships based in Halifax. He was promoted to Commodore and appointed as the first naval Commandant of the Royal Military College of Canada and Honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Governor General in 1957 for a three year period. Commodore Piers then returned to Ottawa as Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, responsible for Plans, Operations and Intelligence. His promotion to Rear Admiral and appointment as Chairman of the Canadian Joint Staff in Washington D.C. was announced in August 1962.

With unification of the three services, this appointment later became Commander Canadian Defence Liaison Staff. In this capacity he acted as the personal representative of the Chief of Defence Staff in Ottawa to the U.S. Military authorities in the Pentagon, as well as the Canadian Permanent Military representative on the Military Committee of NATO, the Canadian National Liaison Representative to the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, and the Principal Military Advisor to the Canadian Ambassador in Washington. This, culminating four years of his service career, included many top-level NATO Military and political meetings in all NATO countries, as well as close collaboration with U.S. military authorities on the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, and all Canada/U.S. military matters.

On completion of 35 years service. Admiral Piers took voluntary retirement in 1967 and he and his wife returned to their permanent home in Chester, N.S. For ten years he was actively engaged in voluntary community work in his home province. On January 1st, 1977 Admiral Piers was appointed as Agent General of Nova Scotia in the United Kingdom and Europe for a two year period. In 1978 he was granted the Freedom of the City of London, and was made an Honorary Doctor of Military Science by the Royal Military College of Canada on December 22nd 1982.

He is married to the former Janet MacNeill of Halifax and has a married daughter and three grandsons residing in Toronto.

RESTIGOUCHE

Completed in 1932 as HMS COMET, she was purchased at the same time as OTTAWA and commissioned as RESTIGOUCHE in Chatham England the same day. Like her sister she arrived at Esquimalt B.C. November 7th, 1938, and left for Halifax November 15, 1939. She performed local escort duties from that port until May 24, 1940 when she left for Plymouth. Upon arriving there on May 31, RESTIGOUCHE was assigned to Western Approaches Command. While assisting in the evacuation of French ports, she rescued survivors of FRASER. She left Liverpool at the end of August for a brief refit at Halifax, returning to the U.K. in January 1941.

In June 1941 RESTIGOUCHE was allocated to Newfoundland Command and in April 1943 became a member of EG C4 in the interval, toiling ceaselessly as a mid-ocean escort. On December 13, 1941 she suffered storm damage en route to convoy ON 44, and extensive repairs were carried out at Greenock. She was allocated to EG 12 in May 1944 for invasion duties, including D-Day, and afterward carried out Channel and Biscay patrols from her base at Plymouth. She returned to Canada in September 1944 for a major refit at Saint John N.B. and Halifax N.S., and on completion proceeded to Bermuda for working up. Returning to Halifax on February 1945 she performed various local duties, and after VE Day was employed for three months bringing home military personnel from Newfoundland. Paid off on October 5, 1945 she was broken up the following year.

Pennant # Wartime - H00

Commanding Officers

15 June 1938 to 25 December 1939 - CDR. W.B.L. Holms, RCN

26 December 1939 to 23 June 1941 - CDR. H.N. Lay RCN

LT. D.W. Piers RCN (XO)

24 June 1941 to 5 June 1943 - LCDR. D.W. Piers RCN

ALGONQUIN

Not a tribal despite her name, she was laid down as HMS VALENTINE but commissioned on February 17, 1944 at Glasgow as HMCS ALGONQUIN. Assigned to the 26th Destroyer Flotilla of the British Home Fleet, she left Scapa Flow on March 31 to help escort a carrier attack on TIRPITZ.

In April she escorted a similar attack on German shipping off the Lofoten Islands, Norway and on May 28 left Scapa for D-Day operations. On June 6 she bombarded shore targets on the Normandy coast. At the end of June she returned to Scapa, from where she carried out attacks on German convoys off Norway and at year's end, escorted convoys JW63 and RA63 to and from Murmansk. On August 22, 1944 she took off 203 of NABOB'S ships company when the latter was torpedoed in the Barents Sea. She returned

to Halifax in February 1945 for refit, leaving on August 12 via Malta to join the British Pacific Fleet, but was recalled on VJ Day and left Alexandria for Esquimalt on November 3rd. There she was paid off into reserve on February 6, 1946, but was re-commissioned on February 25, 1953 after very extensive modernization, and sailed for the east coast that summer. After 14 years service with Atlantic Command, she returned to the west coast March 1967 and was paid off for the last time April 1, 1970 to be broken up in Taiwan in 1971.

Pennant #'s Wartime-R1 7, 1949 onward 224.

Commanding Officers -

17 February 1944 to 19 April 1945 - LCDR. D.W. Piers, DSC RCN

20 April 1945 to 6 February 1946 - LCDR. P.E. Haddon RCN

25 February 1953 to 27 August 1954 - CDR. P.F.X. Russell RCN

28 August 1954 to 10 May 1956 - CAPT. R.L. Hennessy DSC RCN

11 May 1956 to June 7 1956 - CAPT. D.W. Piers DSC RCN

These pages reflect highlights of one Canadian sailor's career including 63 months at sea during a 68 - month war. They were taken from several different books and authors of Canadian Naval History to honour Admiral Desmond W. Piers. It is with great pleasure that the South Shore Naval Association, has granted him a life membership and made him our Honorary President. His full 35 year naval career is mentioned in these pages, but the war - time career is by far the most exciting. A Captain's life at sea at anytime is taxing, in wartime it is absolutely exhausting. It takes an extremely strong individual to survive. Admiral Piers is one of them.

Shipmate, Gerald W. Sigrist, CD,
President, South Shore Naval Association.

SOURCES:

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DESMOND PIERS - NAVAL HERO MOURNED



Desmond Piers 1913-2005
DSC, CM, CD, DscMil, Klj, RCN (Ret'd.)

More than 1000 mourners filled three churches in Chester, N.S. on Friday Nov 18, 2005 to bid farewell to a Second World War Canadian naval hero. Rear Admiral Desmond Piers died on November 1, aged 92.

Piers, a professional sailor from 1932 until his retirement, helped evacuate Allied soldiers from France in 1940, fought in the Atlantic convoy battles, and was commander of HMCS Algonquin during the D-Day invasion in 1944.

France awarded him its highest military medal, L'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur, and he won the Distinguished Service Cross for his service at sea during the convoy battles. "We did our stuff, we were very lucky, and we survived it," he said in 2004.

After the war, he served in top Canadian and NATO military jobs, including chairman of the Canada's Joint Staff and commander of the Canadian defence liaison staff in Washington.

Services were held at St. Stephen's Anglican Church, while St. Augustine's and Chester United Baptist Church carried live feeds. After the service, his remains were brought aboard HMCS Toronto for return to Halifax and placement in the naval crypt at St. Paul's Anglican Church.

At the memorial, his leadership and humility were praised. Among those present was CPO1

Jerry Sigrist (Ret'd). He reports that "It was a very fitting tribute to a very prominent and well loved Naval Officer. The service was lengthy but a beautiful one with about 1000 in attendance.

Herewith the list of Honourary Pallbearers:

Brigadier General Ned Amy, Ret'd
Vice-Admiral Andy Fulton Ret'd
Commander Anthony Griffin, Ret'd
Commodore Bill Hayes Ret'd
Vice-Admiral Ralph Hennessy, Ret'd
Lieutenant (Navy) Andrew Irwin, Ret'd
Vice-Admiral Hugh McNeil, Ret'd
Vice-Admiral Duncan Miller, Ret'd
Commodore Bruce Oland, Ret'd
Vice-Admiral Harry Porter Ret'd
Major General George Spencer, Ret'd
Captain (N) Dick Steele, Ret'd
Rear-Admiral Robert Timbrell, Ret'd
Commodore Larry Wilkins, Ret'd

I had the honour of carrying his medals right behind the above and the ashes. It made an old Chief feel good to be among the brass. To top it off, the pallbearers all stood at attention and saluted as I carried the medals by them. I know it was the medals and ashes but I felt I've never been saluted by so many Admirals".

THE NAVAL PRAYER

O eternal Lord God, who alone
spreadest out of
the heavens, and rulest the raging of
the sea;
who has compassed the waters with
bounds
until day and night come to an end;
be pleased
to receive into thy almighty and
most gracious
protection the persons of us thy
servants and
the fleet in which we serve. Preserve
us from
the dangers of the sea, and from the

violence of
the enemy; that we may be a
safeguard unto our
most gracious sovereign lady. Queen
Elizabeth
and her dominions, and security for
such as
pass on the seas upon their lawful
occasion; that
the inhabitants of our
commonwealth may in
peace and quietness serve thee our
God; and
that we may return in safety to enjoy
the
blessings of the land, with the fruits
of our
labours, and with a thankful
remembrance of
thy mercies to praise and glorify thy
holy name;
through Jesus Christ our lord.

AMEN.



Photo courtesy of Admiral Desmond Piers Naval Association.



After the funeral service. (DND photo submitted by Andy Irwin)



Piers Baker (Grandson) carrying the urn followed by Justin Baker (Great-Grandson) carrying Debby's Medals enroute to the Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) after the funeral service. (*DND photo HS2005-0881-07a*)



HMCS Toronto firing a 13 gun salute off Chester, N.S. on November 18th, 2005. The RIB carrying the urn and wreaths is just approaching the ship. Also BRAVO ZULU DEBBY signal is flying from the yardarm. (DND photo HS2005-0881-22a)

Contributors and Credits:

- 1) CBC News
- 2) Jerry Sigrist <adpna.sigrist(at)ns.sympatico.ca>
- 3) Adm Desmond Piers Naval Association <http://www.adpna.com/>
- 4) Andy Irwin <airwinr17(at)sympatico.ca>

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Medals of Rear-Admiral Desmond William Piers, CM, DSC, CD, DscMil, Klj, RCN (Ret'd)

Distinguished Service Cross (DSC)

Awarded as per Canada Gazette of 5 June 1943 and London Gazette of 2 June 1943

"This Officer has served continuously in His Majesty's Canadian Destroyers since the commencement of hostilities. As Senior Officer of Convoy Escort Groups in the North Atlantic, he has by his vigorous leadership and aggressive attack, been an inspiration to those serving under his command"

Honorary DscMil (DMSC) from RMC in 1978

Member - Order of Canada (CM)

As per Canada Gazette 25 December 1982

Appointed on December 20, 1982 with investiture on April 20th 1983

"The naval career of Rear-Admiral Piers was long and distinguished. Having joined the Navy fifty years ago, he commanded ships, which participated in the Battle of the Atlantic, the invasion of Normandy and other actions of the Second World War. Afterwards he served in Canada, at NATO and as Canadian defence representative in Washington. After retirement he undertook voluntary work in Halifax, in education, sports, the training of the handicapped, the Arts and Tourism. From 1977 to 1979 he was Agent General of Nova Scotia in London.

Knight of the Legion of Honour (France)

As per Canada Gazette

Retired Rear-Admiral Desmond Piers will formally be inducted into the Legion d'Honneur and received the prestigious five-point medal with red ribbon designed for Napoleon in the early 1800s. "It is absolutely our highest recognition of bravery in military action and service," France's Counsel General, Michel Freymuth, said on 02 June 2004. The presentation of the medal and a certificate indicating membership in the Legion of Honour will cap ceremonies in Halifax on 06 June 2004 commemorating the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. The retired rear admiral and his wife Janet greeted news of the accolade with enthusiasm at their home in Chester on Tuesday. "We had the advantage of knowing the setup on the beach from previous missions," he said of the events of D-Day morning. "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." The 90-year old with childhood nickname Debby is one of Canada's Second World War Naval legends. Mr. Piers was just 27 when he took command of HMCS Restigouche and only 30 when he guided HMCS Algonquin and its Officers and crew through the D-Day conflagration. France wants to officially recognize Mr. Piers for his contribution to the D-Day invasion and also for his subsequent missions between England and Normandy, Mr. Freymuth said. "Algonquin was the first Canadian ship to attack, so Allied forces could begin landing in the area." The Algonquin and its crew provided vital support to members of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division, which pushed far into enemy territory on D-Day. France enrolled 10 other Canadian war heroes as Knights of the Legion of Honour in Ottawa at a May 27 ceremony. Mr. Piers has often attributed the achievements of HMCS Algonquin in the D-Day invasion to the skill and diligence of the ship's officers and crew, and he repeated that Tuesday. "This is for all of those guys," he said of the honour from France that he will receive Sunday. Piers went on to command a number of other Canadian battleships involved in the Battle of the Atlantic and other major war events. After the war, he continues to enjoy a long and distinguished naval career. He was an active volunteer in retirement and was agent general for Nova Scotia in the United Kingdom and Europe from 1977 to 1979.

Rear Admiral 'Debby' Piers (UK Telegraph Obituary)

(Filed: 15/11/2005)

Rear-Admiral "Debby" Piers, who has died aged 92, was a young Canadian officer in charge of a slow convoy to Britain which was severely mauled by U-boats; the episode led to the Royal Navy insisting that the Canadians withdraw from the North Atlantic for further training.

When the 42 ships of Convoy SC 107 set off in October 1942, Piers's destroyer Restigouche was the only ship with high-frequency direction-finding (HF/DF) equipment, which he had scrounged from the US Navy at Londonderry. Four other corvettes in the escort either had new captains or were fitted with unreliable radar and short-range ASDIC. When they were attacked west of Cape Race, Newfoundland, by an estimated 17 U-boats, Piers used his HF/DF to sweep aggressively around the convoy, driving off most of the shadowers.

But eight ships were sunk on the first night and seven more in the next week. Piers fought fiercely, but when he limped into Liverpool, the Royal Navy's criticism was harsh.

Senior officers claimed that the Royal Canadian Navy had expanded too rapidly, had taken on too many tasks and was poorly trained. Admiral Sir Max Horton's report pointed out that 80 per cent of the convoy's losses had occurred when it was under Canadian command in the western Atlantic. This ignored the difficulties under which the convoy had sailed, and singled out Piers's youth and inexperience. Certainly Piers was young; he was earning less than his ship's doctor. But he had been senior officer on convoys on at least seven occasions without losing a ship; and he had been in the North Atlantic for three years.

The Canadians stuck by Piers, and he left Restigouche in June 1943 with a reputation as a fine seaman and brilliant tactician. He took a keen interest in the welfare of his sailors and, in a hard-hitting report of his own, recommended better equipment, more home leave and regular mail, longer work-up periods, fewer short-term appointments and better individual training. The ensuing reforms greatly improved the RCN's fighting performance.

The citation for his DSC in 1943 declared: "This officer has served continuously in His Majesty's Canadian destroyers since the commencement of hostilities. As Senior Officer of Convoy Escort Groups in the North Atlantic, he has, by his vigorous leadership and aggressive attack, been an inspiration to those under his command."

Desmond William Piers was born on June 12 1913 into one of the founding families of Halifax, Nova Scotia. His father called him Desy, which was transmuted into Debby when he was a baby. In 1932 Piers graduated from the Royal Military College, Kingston, to become the first cadet to join the Royal Canadian Navy. He trained at sea in the Royal Navy and returned to Canada in 1937 as first lieutenant of "Rusty Guts", as Restigouche was known.

Piers experienced his baptism of fire during the evacuation of France when Restigouche, under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Horatio Nelson Lay, was ordered to assist in evacuating the 51st Highland Division's wounded from St Valery, near Dieppe. Lay asked Piers to send someone ashore to get in touch with the Highlanders. Looking in his cabin mirror, Piers told himself: "Piers, you're the one who's going ashore," and replied to himself: "Aye Aye, Sir." After he had packed binoculars, a signal lamp, chocolate bars and a bottle of whisky in his golf bag, he was told by Lay: "Piers, you're a bloody fool. But okay, find out what's going on and signal it back." Ashore, Piers found Major-General Victor Fortune, who was refusing to leave because he wanted to hold the perimeter defences to allow more men to get away, and Piers narrowly avoided accompanying him into captivity. The propeller of his boat was damaged, and he could make only a half-knot out to where Lay waited for him inshore.

The following year, Piers was the newly-appointed captain of Restigouche when she struck an uncharted rock in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, while escorting Prince of Wales, on which Churchill and Roosevelt held their Atlantic Charter meeting; when she had to put in for repairs, he returned to Halifax, where he married Janet Macneill.

In late 1943 Piers became training officer at Halifax, where he made inspirational speeches about the duty of officers in privileged positions toward their fellow men, while insisting upon very high standards in exercises. He also helped to thwart German prisoners of war who had escaped from Bowmanville, Ontario; he controlled the shore side of operations from the lighthouse at Pointe Maisonnette, New Brunswick, though U-536, which had come to pick them up, evaded the trap set.

At the Normandy invasion, Piers commanded the new destroyer Algonquin, which bombarded the shore in support of Canadian and American troops. He also served in Arctic convoys.

In February 1945 he took part in a mock winter Olympics in northern Russia, winning the 100 yards dash; his crew played ice hockey against the locals, which they lost 3-2.

With the return of peace, Piers was second-in-command of the Canadian aircraft carrier Magnificent, and obtained a pilot's licence; but he also had to quell a protest by ratings exasperated by his maintenance of tough wartime discipline. He held influential appointments in headwaters during an intense period of the Cold War, and was at the centre of decisions concerning the RCN's commitment in Korea as well as about Canada's maritime commitment to Nato. In 1952 he was Assistant Chief for Personnel and Administration to the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic, then returned to sea as commanding officer of the cruiser Quebec and as commander of the First Canadian Escort Squadron.

Piers returned to the Royal Military College as commandant, and in 1960-62 served as Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Plans) at naval headquarters. He was chairman of the Canadian Joint Staff and commander of the Canadian Defence Liaison Staff in Washington.

Piers retired in 1967 to his house, the QuarterDeck, at Chester, Nova Scotia, where he took up community work. But in 1977 he was appointed Agent General of Nova Scotia in London, where he promoted the province's use of tidal energy, publicised the first international gathering of the clans in the province and helped to organise industrial seminars around the country; the following year he was made a Freeman of the City of London.

While thoughtful and considerate of his people, Piers set high standards for himself, and expected the same of others.

At a dinner to commemorate the Battle of the Atlantic two years ago, he played a harmonica and delighted his friends by dancing to the tunes of his own shanties.

He gave 12 acres of land to the Nature Conservancy of Canada in order to ensure public access to one of the last wild headlands of Canada.

"Debby" Piers, who died on November 1, married Janet Macneill, the former wife of Peter Aitken, second son of Lord Beaverbrook, in 1941: he had been smitten since first seeing her on stage at Halifax when, aged six, she played a fairy in a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

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Hero Sails Away!
Chronicle Herald Sat, 19 November 2005.

Hero sails away home

Thousands fill three churches to pay respects to Admiral Desmond Piers
by BEVERLEY WARE South Shore Bureau

CHESTER — Well into his 70s, retired rear admiral Desmond Piers was still doing handstands on the lawn of his home, known as the Quarterdeck, overlooking the waters of Chester Harbour.

More recently, he would sit back after a family dinner, strike a note on the rim of his glass and watch his family sing and dance as he played a jig on his harmonica.

These and other heartwarming memories flooded forth Friday at a memorial service for the former commander of a navy destroyer that helped lead Canadian and other Allied soldiers to victory in Normandy on D-Day.

"Somehow, Chester will never be quite the same without him," Mr. Piers's great-grandson Justin Baker said in an emotional service at St. Stephen's Anglican Church. Mr. Piers died Nov. 1 at age 92.

He was a man, Justin said, who proved his love for country and family by the way he lived every day.

It took three churches to hold those who had come to honour and celebrate the life of Mr. Piers, known as Debby to his friends. The nickname had stuck since childhood when his mother affectionately called him Desy — a moniker that youngsters found too difficult to get their tongues around.

Such a show of admiration and respect was, said Rear Admiral Dan McNeil of Maritime Forces Atlantic, a true measure of the good man Mr. Piers was.

When he was born, the Canadian navy was only three years old and it had just two ships. He came of age, as did the Canadian navy, during the Second World War, when Canada's navy grew to become the third largest in the world.

Mr. Piers was just 28 when he took the helm of HMCS Restigouche, for two years leading merchant convoys across the submarine-infested waters of the Atlantic. At 30, he took command of HMCS Algonquin, giving fire support during the invasion of Normandy.

He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and inducted into France's Legion d'Honneur last year, that country's highest honour for bravery in military action and service.

Friday's service was held in the very church Mr. Piers attended as a young boy with his mother during summers spent in Chester.

He left the navy 38 years ago and returned to this community and his church. Indeed, the ensign that flew on HMCS Algonquin as he commanded it on D-Day is displayed in the church nave.

It had been decades since Mr. Piers sailed on a Canadian navy ship, but he set sail one final time Friday as his widow Janet, surrounded by family, friends and dignitaries, looked on from the back lawn of their home as HMCS Toronto sailed into the harbour with all hands standing at attention.

The Canadian flag on the lawn flew at half-mast as mourners gathered for a toast to honour the man who had earned their respect for his actions during times of war and

peace. Mr. Piers's great-granddaughters stood on the jetty under a warm sun, gently wiping tears from their eyes as Rev. Jim McCorrison handed an urn containing Mr. Piers's ashes to a navy member who sailed out to the waiting ship.

As the Zodiac pulled away, Mrs. Piers lifted her hand in brief farewell, then turned to a circle of family and friends, many of them in uniform, and raised her glass in a toast. Then she turned back to the water, lifting her glass in salute with a warm smile on her face — a tribute to a man who lived an accomplished life, and lived it well.

The Toronto fired a 13-gun salute. As the ship passed the golf course where Mr. Piers spent countless hours, it fired off one last parting shot.

Mr. Piers's ashes will be laid to rest in the naval columbarium at St. Paul's Anglican Church in Halifax's Grand Parade.

When Janet Piers married her husband 64 years ago, she also married the navy. She would stand in Halifax's Point Pleasant Park, holding daughter Anne's hand as she watch her husband sail to sea yet again. He spent all but four of the 68 months of the Second World War at sea.

Mr. Piers proposed to his future bride during a dinner on board HMCS Restigouche, on which he was serving when the Second World War broke out, said Rear Admiral McNeil. They married on a 10-day break during which sailors fashioned a kneeling bench, a cross and candlesticks.

Grandson and namesake Piers Baker said he clearly remembers his grandfather stomping his feet and playing his ever-present harmonica on his 90th birthday, a vivid snapshot of how great he was at giving joy to others.

"I'm so proud to be able to say Admiral Desmond Piers was my grandfather," he said.

The Piers ensured a rink was built in Chester, but didn't stop there. They laced up their own skates and went out onto the ice to teach children how to skate.

Mr. Piers didn't do anything by halves, the priest said. With his wife at his side, a job wasn't finished until it was done properly and Father McCorrison said that taught everyone around him "to do all and be all they might be in the world God so loved."



A photograph of rear admiral Desmond Piers smiles out at his family and friends during a memorial service for the naval hero at St. Stephen's Anglican Church in Chester on Friday. The Second World War veteran died Nov. 1 at the age of 92. The admiral was decorated with many medals for distinguished service and bravery throughout his career, especially for his actions during the D-Day invasion at Normandy. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)



60th Anniversary Ceremonies in Halifax Nova Scotia

By Lt(N) Pat Jessup

Navy Public Affairs

Maritime Forces Atlantic

"The freedom that we have today was purchased with the blood of another generation", Padre Jack Barrett, Formation Chaplain's Office, MARLANT

On Sunday, 6 June the 60th Anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy was commemorated in Halifax...

...Following the ceremonies, France's highest recognition for bravery in military action and service was bestowed upon Rear Admiral Desmond Piers Ret'd for his actions during the "Débarquement". On behalf of President Jacques Chirac, Michel Freymüth, the Consul General of France to Moncton and Halifax, inducted Admiral Piers Ret'd into the "Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur". It was the first time that the ceremony of induction has taken place outside of France. Admiral Piers graciously accepted the recognition on behalf of all D-Day veterans saying: "We did our stuff, we were very lucky and we survived it." Created in 1802 by Napoleon and replacing all previous royal orders abolished by the French Revolution, the Legion of Honours is the highest award given for outstanding service to France. Admiral Piers was the Commanding Officer of HMCS ALGONQUIN during the D-Day invasion and led the bombardment of enemy defences along the Normandy coast as well as providing fire support to the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division as the soldiers advanced inland from the beach.



"CROST THE BAR 1 NOVEMBER 2005"

Naval hero Desmond Piers dead at 92

Rear admiral remembered for courage, humour

By KRISTEN LIPSCOMBE Staff Reporter, Halifax Chronicle Herald

At the Battle of the Atlantic dinner aboard HMCS Sackville in 2003, an 89-year-old Second World War veteran 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," Michael Whitby, senior naval historian with the Defence Department, remembered Wednesday about the late rear admiral Desmond William (Debby) Piers, one of Canada's most distinguished war heroes.

"After a wonderful supper, Debby Piers got up and all these guys sang naval songs . . . and he led them all," Mr. Whitby said. "It was just delightful and the whole crowd was just enamoured by this."

Mr. Piers, who picked up the nickname Debby in childhood, died peacefully Tuesday at South Shore Regional Hospital in Bridgewater at age 92.

Vice-Admiral Bruce Mac-Lean, chief of Maritime staff and commander of the Canadian navy, said in a news release Wednesday 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," Vice-Admiral MacLean said. "He will forever be remembered as one of our finest."

Mr. Piers is renowned for more than just his considerable skills as a naval commander.

"This magnetism that this man had, this charm . . . he had a wonderful sense of humour," Mr. Whitby said.

Not only is Mr. Piers remembered as "an incredible, charming gentleman" with a cheerful zest for life and a love for sports such as golf and tennis, but he was also "a very inspiring leader," Mr. Whitby said of the Second World War naval legend.

"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."

Mr. Piers sort of came of age the same way the navy did, Mr. Whitby said.

"He just got the job done. He found a way to get it done and the navy's very much like that today."

The retired rear admiral received France's highest honour for bravery in military action and service — L'Ordre National de la Legion d'Honneur — in June 2004 for his courageous actions as commanding officer of HMCS Algonquin.

He was only 28 when he commanded HMCS Restigouche and just 30 in 1944 when he led HMCS Algonquin and "directly participated in the invasion in France where he guided his ship and her crew through the conflagration of D-Day," the navy news release said.

The presentation of the prestigious five-point medal with red ribbon and a certificate indicating his membership in the Legion of Honour were presented to him in Halifax last year to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

Mr. Piers also received the Distinguished Service Cross "for his vigorous and invaluable service at sea during the Battle of the Atlantic," the navy release said.

Mr. Piers led numerous other Canadian warships and was involved in many other historic events throughout the war.

He remained active in the navy after the war, serving in key positions such as commander of HMCS Quebec, senior Canadian officer afloat (Atlantic) and assistant chief of naval staff. He was agent general for Nova Scotia in the United Kingdom and Europe from 1977 to 1979 and continued to actively volunteer during his retirement.

Mr. Piers was born in Halifax on June 12, 1913. He entered the Royal Canadian Navy in September 1932 as a cadet through the Royal Military College of Canada.

The South Shore Naval Association changed its name to the Admiral Desmond Piers Naval Association in 2004 as a tribute to his service and dedication to the navy and his country.

Mr. Whitby said Mr. Piers understood "how to bring about good morale" on the ships he ran.

He said the Restigouche and the Algonquin "were both very, very happy, effective ships, and happy ships are where there is great respect amongst the entire crew, up and down the chain of command."

Mr. Piers was universally respected and admired, particularly by his fellow veterans.

"He wasn't rank-conscious," Mr. Whitby said. "It didn't matter who you were, he was always friendly, very outgoing and always seemed to remember your name."

Navy spokeswoman Lieut. Pat Jessup said the family is keeping funeral details private for now but will be forthcoming in the near future. His obituary says donations may be made to the Royal Military College, the Heart and Stroke Foundation or a charity of choice. Condolences can be sent to the David Funeral Home in Chester.

Wednesday night's concert at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in Halifax, called 'Till We Meet Again, commemorates Remembrance Week and was dedicated to the memory of Mr. Piers, she said.

Mr. Piers is survived by his wife Janet (Macneill), his companion of 64 years, daughter Anne Baker, three grandsons, six great grand-children, brother Walter Harrington Piers and many nieces, nephews and cousins, his obituary says. He was predeceased by his sister, Virginia Finces-Noyes.

Lieut. Jessup said Mr. and Mrs. Piers were truly a team, even building a rink in their hometown of Chester to give children a chance to learn how to skate.

"They've always been very strong supporters of the Stadacona band and they would have been here tonight," Lieut. Jessup said of the sold-out concert.

"He had a very full life and lived it very well. He died on Nov. 1, which is All Saints Day. I think he's taken his place."

She said he "was more than a hero. . . . He was such an outstanding man. He had this tremendous sense of community.

"The navy was very dear to his heart and we hold him in such high regard."



