



Oral History Interview Transcript

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Interviewee: John Mason

Interviewer: Tony Thatcher

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Interviewee: Capt. John Mason

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By Tony INTERVIEWER

Tape 1, Side 1

INTERVIEWER: My name is Tony Thatcher, Chairman of the CANDIB Committee and this is a CANDIB oral history project interview with John Mason recorded on Monday, 23 March 2009 at Victoria, British Columbia. This interview is to explore with John Mason his experiences in two shipyards and as Engineering Officer taking over three vessels the HMCS BUCKINGHAM, OTTAWA and CHAUDIERE. And I'd like to at this point to ask him to introduce himself and tell us a little bit about the job that he was doing for those ships.

MASON: My name is John Mason. I am nearly 86 years old. I joined the Navy in 1942, the RCNVR as a second class stoker. And almost immediately began a course called the ERA Apprentices Training Scheme. We trained at various places, starting with Galt, Hamilton and the NTEs on both coasts. My first ship, in fact, was a Four Piper, the HMCS NIAGARA an exUSN destroyer for about six months acting as a stoker doing all those good things like bilges and boilers. And then we went to sea. My ship that I joined was HMCS FORT ERIE, a frigate which commissioned in Quebec City. I won't say I was on the RNO staff. I certainly wasn't but we took her away from that shipyard to Halifax and where I started my work in the boiler room and then to the engine rooms and oiler and got my stokers ticket, if you were, on auxiliary machinery, then I served my time and six months at sea as a stoker before I became an acting ERA 4th Class and had the rank and privileges of a Petty Officer and with delight moved to the Petty Officers' mess from the Stokers' mess. That ship, in fact, paid off as the war ended and I was sent to stand by HMCS ANTIGONISH which was finishing its refit in Pictou, Nova Scotia. I was by then a confirmed ERA 4th Class with an Engine Room ticket and that ship was eventually paid off to reserve in Cape Breton. Then, being RCNVR, was released and took my DVA credits to get a degree in Engineering at the University of Toronto. When I graduated there were hundreds of engineers, but only a dozen or so jobs. I was tentatively going to work for DIL at Beloeil, Quebec because I could speak a little bit of French and that was very tempting but I got an offer from REME to get a commission in REME as a Second Lieutenant where my pay would be \$230 a month. Very tempting because the pay I was going to get at DIL was about \$200 out of which I would have room and board. So I went down to the Navy and asked them what things like this they had to offer and they said no, not at the present time. Don't call us, we'll call you. So with that I went off and started to prepare myself to go to Quebec on a bid for information and when the phone rang and it was the Recruiting Officer of the HMCS YORK said could I come down and talk. So to cut a long story short I went for an interview in Ottawa and shortly afterwards found myself in the Navy and my first posting, of course, was an Officer's Divisional Course in Halifax, parade square, which in large response from GIs and Gunnery Officers and then I was sent off to the Royal Naval Engineering College in England for about 6 months. But because I had been an Engine Room Artificer they didn't think I would have to spend that much time, but they sent me off to a ship HMS KENYA in the Far East Station. And I spent a year in KENYA, certainly got my Officer's Engine Room ticket and then back to Keyham [Royal Naval Engineering College] for a specialization course for a year and then to Halifax where I joined the Canadian cruiser QUEBEC. Amongst other things I was a Divisional Officer and a Damage Control Officer.

And been there for a year and a quarter when I was drafted to stand by the building of the HMCS BUCKINGHAM in Canadian Vickers in Montreal. This was a frigate reciprocating engines, steam powered, and I think I stood by that ship about 3 months, not very long, tentatively on the staff of PNO which at that time which was Graham Bridgman and we sailed away merrily from Montreal with very little problem. This was not a new ship, she had been refitted and rebuilt and so it wasn't quite the same as commissioning a brand new ship.

I was about a year and a half in BUCKINGHAM when I was drafted back to Montreal to Vickers to stand by the building of HMCS OTTAWA. This was the third OTTAWA. The ship was going to commission about a year from the time I arrived and so I was on the staff of PNO keeping an eye on the development and testing of the various appliances and equipment on the ship taking it out on trials in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, flying the red ensign, and the ship in fact was operated by shipyard staff. A few of us including myself and the Chief ERA went along as future ship's company and we were able to make comments and suggestions of what we saw and what was happening. Then we went back to Montreal for a sort of frantic period of getting things done trying to make the deadline for commissioning and by some miracle it happened. It was in November in 1956, if I recall, we had to get out before the shipping season ended. And so we commissioned in Montreal at that time and I was the Engineer Officer and we went on trials, of course, of our own then in mainly Bermuda, West Indies. Very nice. I do remember we left Halifax in a blizzard and the cables and lines were frozen around bollards in the ship. Unbelievable, that 12 hours later we were in the Gulf Stream.

To cut a long story short, I served in that ship for about 2 years and I was then posted ashore in the dockyard on staff of the Dockyard Manager and building in the shipyard, the Halifax Shipyard, was the HMCS CHAUDIERE and I visited her on several occasions and the Engineer Officer did not want to go to sea on the ship. He told me he would do anything to get out of it and so I said well, how about me. So we got in touch with the personnel people in Ottawa and they said okay. If MASON is prepared to do it, we will change the posting. So I became the Engineering Officer standing by CHAUDIERE and we commissioned that one in '59, I think, for a couple of years and in that ship the General List system came in 1962 whereby any officer could take training and pass command exams and get a watchkeeping ticket, not necessarily in that order, and aspire for command. So being unmarried and having some time to spare I decided to go for it. So within the next six months I had acquired a bridge watchkeeping ticket. In fact I became the Senior Watchkeeper in the ship's bridge. I was fortunate in that as far as the engine room was concerned my second dickie was John Plante who was a brilliant young man and he had graduated from RMC with a Masters degree in Engineering and he went back to RMC as a professor and acquired a PhD [from MIT]. So things were in good hands. In CHAUDIERE, I enjoyed that very much because it was another world and I guess the Captain was pleased with me too because he gave me a good write up and I guess that's all for now.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned you had experience with two yards. I would be interested to know what your relationship was between the PNO staff, or Naval officers in general, and the shipyard staff.

MASON: Well, Vickers, of course, was an old established yard, building ships since the First World War, so they had a long experience of building Navy ships and/or refitting them. So they were used to talking to and about and even in Navy jargon to the Navy or to the PNO staff about the job. We found that they were prepared to almost bend over backwards to do anything we wanted unless, of course, it was a major design change. They made several

changes themselves which were adopted by the PNO for the benefit of the ship. Because, I guess, they were looking ahead to the future. These weren't the last ships they were hoping to build for the Navy and they wanted the goodwill to be maintained.

INTERVIEWER: Another interesting aspect would be how you found the state of the yards. Were they modern, modern yards, modern practises, machinery and that sort of thing. Could you tell a bit about the comparison between the two?

MASON: Well, the Vickers yard, of course, was an old and well-established shipyard. They had all the modern equipment that one would expect for not only building ships but maintaining and/or testing them. Halifax Shipyards was not as old or established, a smaller shipyard and with perhaps less experience over the longer term. I think the philosophy there too was to try and satisfy the Navy anyway they could because there was always the future. Hopefully they could get involved in that. I find it difficult to choose between the two yards.

INTERVIEWER: When the St Laurent Class destroyers came in they had a Y100 boiler system engine, boiler and engine system. That was new technology to the Navy and I would be interested to hear what kind of support or any sort of problems you had with that.

MASON: Well, the boilers were new in that they had high degree heat. They were 550 PSI and up to 750 degrees superheat. So that in itself was a new criterion. I remember in OTTAWA that we had a problem with the risers which go from the steam drum to the water drum outside of the heated area and we had problems with leaking where they entered the lower drum. And the experts come down from Galt [Cambridge] Ontario, Babcock & Wilcox with their own equipment and spent a weekend where they used that to expand the tubes, these big tubes about 4 inches in diameter, where they entered the water drum and then, of course, test the water tested them and they proved to be tight. And then steam tested them and they were satisfactory so people working on their own, well don't know whether they are on their own, but working on the weekend and if the result was satisfactory and did not hold up the trials of the ship itself. The controls, the Bailey [Meter] controls for those boilers were operated by compressed air, low pressure compressed air and for that purpose there was a small automatic self-contained air compressor on the catwalk in the boiler room and it was cooled by sea water. But then one time we were about to sail when not one but both of them failed. And with the sea water in the damn oil, well that was a great mystery, but we sailed anyway and I used the main big air compressor in the engine room through reducing valves to keep the ship operating and took these damn little toys out to the dockyard and they couldn't figure out why the thing had failed except of course there was a hole in the cooler. And they went right back to the material in the cooler and instead of making it in stainless steel the maker made it out of stainless iron. I never heard of stainless iron. But it had rusted through.

INTERVIEWER: In general, were you able to maintain or correct all the faults that you had on board ship? Were you very self-sufficient as far as maintenance goes overall?

MASON: Well, except for minor things like I just mentioned which you could repair if we had the material yeah I think the hands deserve a lot of credit because they are always doing something that needed to be ...I'd say, "Well, what are you doing?" "Well, I am doing this. The Chief told me to do it." Sure, I think that we managed to maintain, but we got more experienced, better as time went by. Also if you are the first off, as we were, you got a lot of things you don't expect. How to operate machinery of course, but we went out on trials with things going pretty well. The trials party were largely civilians with a special steam party put

together for that purpose that went from one shipyard to another to test. But really the only time that me and my crew took over was when we finally sailed from the shipyard. So a bit of a suspense there.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, in the shipyard you said that there was a crew that actually operated the vessel.

MASON: Yes, they did all the ships throughout the program. They were mostly exRN I think, I can't be sure of that, but they sailed the ship or steamed the ship.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like going out for the first time without them?

MASON: Well, we were confident really. We'd been long overlooking shoulders at things perhaps I need a hand here and there but not too concerned. We weren't out to break any records. We steamed down to Halifax in record time and made it. And another time, this wasn't the same story. But I was the Captain of the ALGONQUIN and we were going up to refit in Sorel [MIL] and when we left Halifax it was alright but when we got into the Gulf of St. Lawrence we got into a fair storm and we were rolling and pitching quite a bit. Suddenly we lost steerage. Well, that's not serious normally but it is very concerning and they found out that some ass had left the hatch to the steering gear open so the steering gear flats were flooded. After we got that settled, we dried it out. It caused the captain to have a few heart palpitations. I wasn't acting as the Engineer Officer, I had a very good Engineering Officer, Norm Thompson. He was an ERA, commissioned [officer]. When I was in QUEBEC Norm Thompson was a P2 on one of the throttles.

The US had a destroyer in Bellingham [Washington]. It is still there. The latest and highest steam pressure. They combined one boiler 1 engine. A sign on the patrol boat "Do not let the steam pressure drop below 1000 psi. - 1200 psi was the operating pressure. I think it was as high as anyone went. It was double what we had!!

INTERVIEWER: I would like to thank you very much for this interview recognizing that you came unprepared.

MASON: I hope this has helped, Tony.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS

ABBREVIATIONS

NTE	Naval Training Establishments
ERA	Engine Room Artificer
DVA	Department of Veteran Affairs
REME	Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
PNO	Principle Naval Overseer
MIL	Marine Industries Limited