



Donald Douisen Snow
Ordinary Seaman Royal Navy
Service # 220885
World War 11

As a young boy, I learned that my uncle, Donald Snow, older brother to my mother, had been killed in action in World War II. I had often stood around the war memorial, located on Water Street, Bay Roberts, on July 1 and November 11, and heard his name being read as an older family member laid a wreath in remembrance and in honor of the supreme sacrifice that he had made while serving as a member of the Royal Navy during the second Great War.

History lessons had taught me that Newfoundland had produced about 3200 volunteers who had been recruited into the Royal Navy, more than any other branch of the British military during WWII. These were scattered throughout the division and served all over the globe. They had assisted in the assault landings at Normandy and Madagascar; helped rescue Allied troops from the beaches of Dunkirk and Greece; provided shuttle service for troops along the North African coast; and some had been deployed to help escort convoys in the Battle of the Atlantic. However, I had no sense of where my uncle's short tenure in the Royal Navy had taken him, nor the circumstances leading to his early death.

To my knowledge, there had never been any great family discussion about my uncle's service, and for some reason, I never really questioned family members about him or his death. My initial investigation started with a telephone conversation with Donald's youngest surviving sibling, my uncle, Gerald Snow. He provided me with some basic information which led me to do further research via the internet and subsequently led me to make contact with their sister, Irene Mercer (Snow). Since Donald (Don, as he was always affectionately referred to by family

members and friends), could now have been 102 years old, had he survived the war effort. Neither could vividly remember details about their older brother and his life before volunteering for service in the British Royal Navy, but I was able to piece together some interesting details surrounding this individual, who at the tender age of 19 years, made the supreme sacrifice.

Donald Douisen Snow was born to parents, Annie (Roberts) and Charles Snow of Bay Roberts on October 22, 1921. At the time of his birth, he was the third eldest of a family that eventually would consist of a total of eight children (five boys and three girls). His two older brothers, William and George, as well as Cecil, the next child to be born into the Snow family, following Donald, died within the first couple of years of birth.

As a young boy, Don showed himself to be like most other boys his age. The history of his early school life is basically unknown. However, it can be assumed that he was a product of the times, and during the 20's and 30's, life in Newfoundland was not easy, to say the least. Many young men and women were taken out of school by their parents so they could become gainfully employed and help contribute to the needs of a rather large family. Many ended up on the Labrador, participating in the fishery with their parents, some close family member, or friend of the family, but Donald, being the son of a local store keeper and labourer, did not join the fishery. Instead, he helped the family with the family garden and doing odd jobs around the community. Gerald remembers sitting on a rock at the end of the lane waiting for Don to return home, after completing his chores, with the horse and cart or sleigh, depending on the season of the year. Don would stop, pick up his younger brother and give him a ride up the lane. He would regularly haul coal from the coal shed on Coley's Point to the homes of those who paid him for this service with the family's trusty steed, a white horse, called Doll. If Doll was not being used for work purposes, she could be found grazing on the family land, located at North Waters, during the daytime. Some time following the evening meal, Doll would be returned to the barn located in the back yard of the family home on Water Street.

Though family members can no longer remember or were too young to take note of many details about Donald's youth, it is a known fact that spent some of his free time as a member of the local Scout troop. This group was well versed and practiced in the art of military drill, a skill set that would later prove to be valuable in the training of his comrades, during their long boat trip to England.

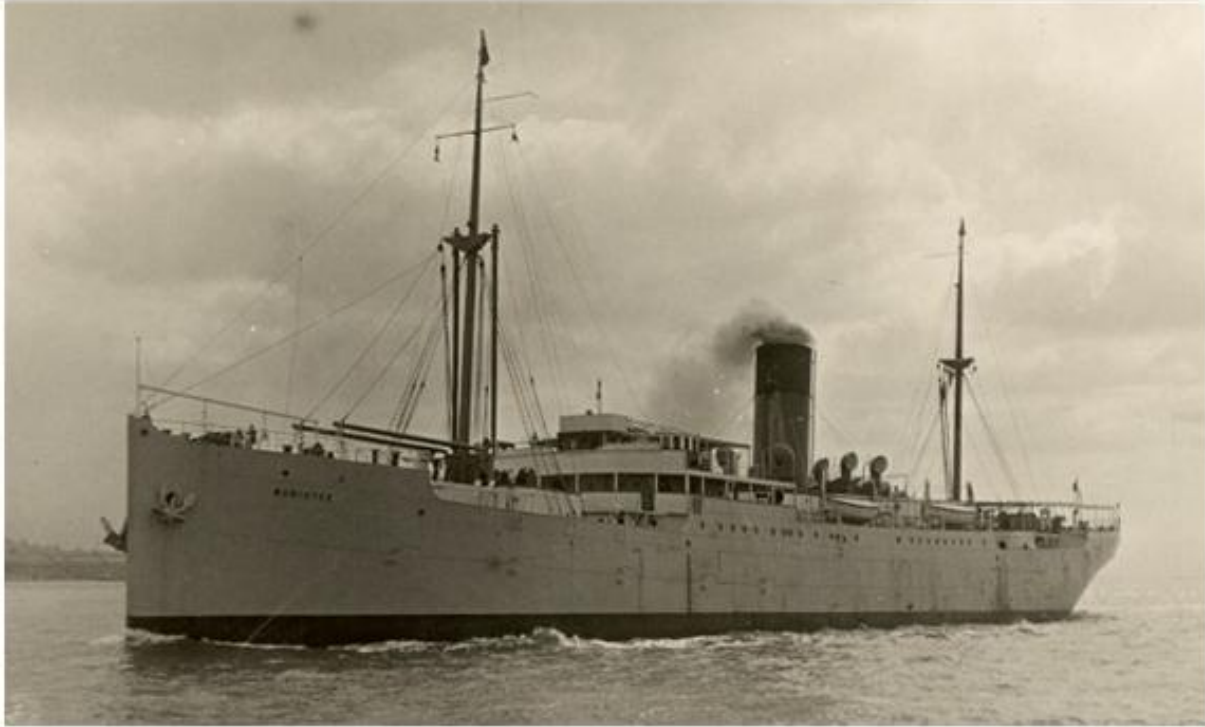
Don was actively seeking other more gainful employment, but to no avail. He had been trying, for some time, to secure a job working on the roads but was turned down, basically because his father owned a store. I guess the prospective employer felt that there was other, more deserving lads who needed a job. It was, apparently, his lack of success in the local job market that pushed him to seek employment with the Crown. Like most young volunteers, Donald may have considered enlistment as an option because of the promised, steady pay of 2 shillings per day. The idea of receiving steady pay would have been enticing to most young men at a time when Newfoundland had been devastated by the Depression.

A magistrate from the Holyrood area came to Bay Roberts several times a month in an attempt to enlist young, able-bodied men for the war effort. Don initially tried to join the armed forces, but was rejected by the magistrate, presumably because of his young age. The basic requirements laid out for an intending but preferably, unmarried recruit, even though married recruits were accepted, meant that the individual had to be between the age of 18 and 25 years and at least 5 feet 2 inches in height weighing more than 112 lbs. They also had to have perfect eyesight and the ability to read and write. Over the ensuing weeks, Don made several attempts to enlist. He tried for the Navy and the Forestry unit, but was turned down repeatedly. He must have been relentless in his pursuits, because he was finally accepted as a recruit for the Royal Navy.

His enlistment was part of a second major campaign, launched in 1940, the intention of which was to enlist an additional 1000 Newfoundland volunteers for service with the British Royal Navy. By the end of July of that year, all had successfully arrived in England. With the recruitment criteria in mind, there must have been some other factor that had interfered with Donald's initial attempts. At the time of his enlistment, Donald was 19 years old and became part of the 11th volunteer contingent headed for the mother country. He was assigned the Regimental Number RN (P/JX 220885) and was given the designation of 'Ordinary Seaman', since he had no marine experience and would, for some time, be subjected to carrying out menial general duties such as painting, scrubbing, and splicing rope. Donald was to report to St. John's, in preparation for his voyage to England, where he would be assigned his specific ship and duties. While in St. John's, awaiting the voyage, the new recruits had a group picture taken, a common practice during this time. However, it is understood that Donald had recently had his teeth extracted (reason unknown) and was, therefore, not available for inclusion in the group photo.

Subsequently, the family received information indicating that the drill skills he had acquired as a member of the Scouts movement, had been employed on the cross-Atlantic voyage. Apparently, he was the only one onboard who had received such training and had been designated the duty of doing drill training with his recently enlisted companions.

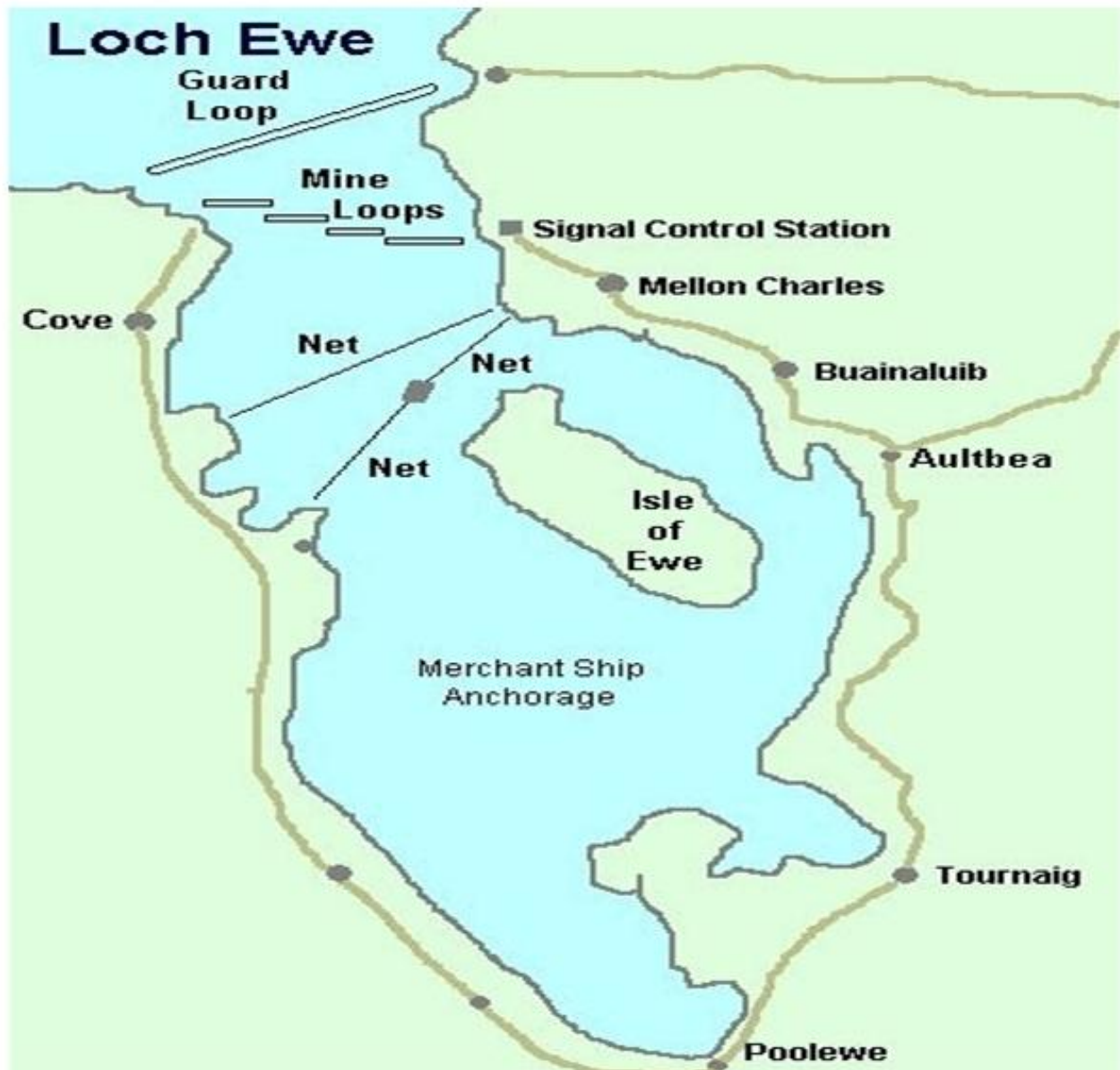
Upon his arrival in England, Don was assigned to the HMS MANISTEE, a 5600 ton steam-powered, British Merchant ship that had recently been purchased from a British shipping company, Cammell Laird & Co. Ltd, Birkenhead, by the British Admiralty and pressed into service as an Ocean Boarding Vessel. This vessel had measurements of 122m x 15.6m x 9.2m and could do 10.5 knots. She was modestly equipped with 2 - 6 inch (152 mm) guns, 1 - 12 pounder gun and 1 - anti-aircraft gun and had a crew of 141.



HMS M ANISTEE

The HMS MANISTEE had left port on the east coast of England as part of convoy EN79, heading for the natural deep water sea lock, Lock Ewe, located in the Northwestern Highlands of Scotland. Loch Ewe was a very important sea base for the British, especially during World War II, because its 10 mile long, lock was protected from the open sea by a narrow mouth. It was, therefore, sheltered from the high winds of the North Atlantic. The multiple, strategically placed, underwater mines and two boom nets, located at the entrance to the lock, protected the many ships, which gathered at this convoy, collecting point, from attack from German submarines (U-boats). Up until December 30, 1944, when the last convoy departed Loch Ewe, some 481 merchant ships and over 100 navel escort vessels had passed through its narrow mouth, for a total of 19 convoys destined for North America, West Africa, or to transport vital supplies to Murmansk and Archangel in Russia.

On February 19, 1941, the ships that had arrived from the east coast of England in convoy EN79, set sail from Lock Ewe with orders to join convey OB288, which was located North West of Ireland but South of Iceland. HMS MAINSTEE (F-104) was a designated escort for this convoy. The headlands of Lock Ewe, would have been the last point of land seen by Don and his fellow ship-mates.



The convoy had been ordered to change course in order to avoid a possible U-boat attack and an air attack. Records show that a second course alteration was ordered by the Admiralty but was not carried out, for some unknown reason.

At 20:00 hours, on February 23, 1941, four days after leaving the protected port of Loch Ewe, the MAINSTEE received orders to leave the convoy for some unknown reason. The remaining ships were now left with no real defense against submarines. Despite intelligence reports indicating that at least 6 submarines were converging on the convoy to form a patrol line, the Commodore kept the convoy in formation on a NW course.

As evening set in, the sky was clear and the wind speed was recorded as 0. It must have been so calm and peaceful moving through the calm waters of the North Atlantic. However, the calmness of the evening changed abruptly just before midnight. At 22:42 Berlin Time, it was recorded that the HMS MANISTEE, under the command of Lt. Cdr Eric Haydn Smith, RNR, had received hits to the engine room from a spread of two torpedoes, which had been launched from U-107. It was also noted that the action slowed the ship's forward movement, but contrary to the expectations of the enemy, the ship slowed but continued on its journey. At 22:56 hours, the Italian submarine, BIANCHI, fired at the MAINSTEE's stern from a distance of 600 meters. Two minutes later, U-107 fired two more torpedoes, which were meant to finish off the job, but because the ship suddenly began to move again, those torpedoes missed their intended target, as did a stern torpedo fired at 23:42.

One can only imagine the chaos among the crew of the MAINSTEE during this time, as they were obviously in panic mode, reeling from the devastation they were witnessing and realizing that the end was most certainly near. A number of these crew members were unseasoned sailors, between the ages of 17 and 20, who had never encountered this level of terror and uncertainty at any point in their lives. Many, like Donald Snow, at age 19, were now experiencing the horrors of war and sheer desperation, most for the first time. Despite the chaos on and below the decks, there apparently was a seasoned, determined commander at the helm. The fortitude and sheer determination to escape the inevitable can be easily seen in the fact that, despite receiving several hits to the engine room, he had kept his ship moving in a zig-zag fashion for approximately nine hours following the initial, constant barrage of torpedoes.

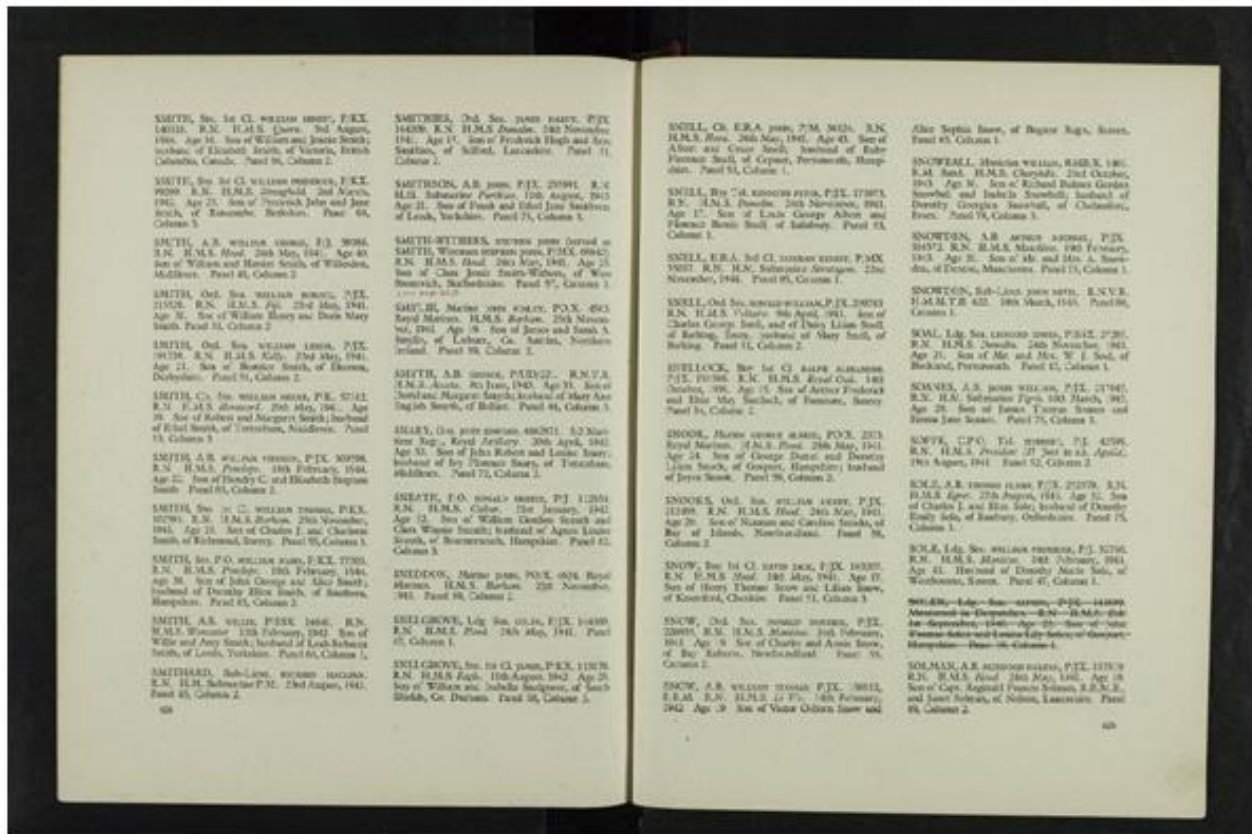
Unfortunately, there was an equally determined U-boat captain in high pursuit, and after a long chase through the quiet night, he ordered the firing of two more torpedoes at 7:28 hours on February 24, 1941. One is reported to have connected with the stern of HMS MAINSTEE causing her to sink to a watery grave, marking Day 542 of the war.

When news of the hit was received by the remaining ships in the convoy, three were ordered to alter their course to search for survivors. Upon extensive searching of the location, last reported by HMS MANISTEE, the HEATHER, CHURCHILL and LEOPARD found no sign of the ill-fated ship nor the 141 crew members.

It is interesting to note that Donald's sister, Irene, recalls her mother going to bed, following her attendance at a lodge meeting on the evening of February 23, 1941. Some time during the night, she had awakened and reported to her husband that she had a strange feeling that something was wrong. Her words were to the effect that "...water is going over Don tonight.", undoubtedly a premonition of her son's drowning. Even though the family had nothing official to verify Donald's death, it has been further reported that my grandmother's premonition

continued on March 12, 1941. She was, apparently, washing clothes on that date, and several times during the washing, she was so overcome that she went to the front room, and cried over the fact that she had had visions of people coming up the lane. She had interpreted these visions as a sign that she was to receive word that Don had, indeed, died on February 23. The very next day, March 13, 1941, the family received a visit from the Anglican minister, Rev. Thoraville, informing them that Donald HAD, indeed, drowned during the early morning hours of February 23, following the torpedoing of his ship, HMS MANISTEE.

Today, Donald Douisen Snow's contribution to 'King and Country' is honored and remembered by his home town via an inscription on the War Memorial located on Water Street, in Bay Roberts. Donald's service to the Commonwealth has been further recognized by having his name and rank placed on a memorial erected by the British Government and located on Panel 58; Column 2 of the Portsmouth Naval Memorial, located in Hampshire, UK. along with all those other sailors and soldiers who gave their lives during the many battles of World War II. This particular panel can be found on the Southern Common, overlooking the promenade.



I have chosen to remember the uncle that I never met, through the words of poem that I was inspired to write following the aforementioned Remembrance Day service in 2016:

My Uncle Don, A Casualty of War!

So many young men left family and friends,
In response to the call from the King to defend,
The freedoms of life that were known and enjoyed,
To fight for their country and King they deployed.
The Union Jack was the flag that was flown,
O're our Newfoundland home, allegiance was shown.

Some for adventure, not knowing much more,
Young men packed their bags and walked through the door.
Because times were tough, and work it was scarce,
There weren't many options, and Hitler was fierce.
They signed on the line, their skills they were few,
Just what lay ahead, not one of them knew.

Some joined the army, carried bayonets and guns,
Marched throughout Europe, taught to fire and run
From the shells and gun fire sent from enemy lines,
While for others, the Air Force suited just fine,
They flew the big planes, dropped bombs from the sky,
Causing major destruction without asking, "Why?"

My mother's brother, Donald Snow was his name,
After several attempts, not for glory or fame,
Joined the navy, getting work was his goal,
But he didn't have long to play out this roll,
Just six short months after leaving our shores,
At the age of nineteen, his life was no more.

While on escort mission, with a convoy of ships,
HMS MANISTEE became target on its ill-fated trip.

After several hits and through the long night,
While the U-boats kept following, the ship maintained flight.
We can't know or imagine the chaos on board,
As the fate of the ship and its crew were assured.

By the early light of morning, February 24, '41,
The little isle of Newfoundland lost yet another native son,
The ship and its crew slipped to a watery grave,
When rescue ships came, not a soul to be saved.
In a month or so, the news reached our shore,
Donald Douisen Snow was heard of no more.

Since the end of the war, we all gather round,
The soldier that stands in the center of town.
He stands alone, with head held high,
To help us remember; to help signify,
The courage, the bravery, of all who were lost,
The supreme sacrifice, what a terrible cost!

Lest we forget!

By Clarence G. Mercer
December 7, 2016

*Medals Presented To Ordinary Seaman Donald Douisen Snow
WW II*



*1939-1945 Star
(Ribbon Reversed)*



War Medal 1939-1945



*Atlantic Star
(Ribbon Reversed)*