

Belleville man served in navy aboard frigate

Old salt remembers call to action

By Luke Hendry

THE INTELLIGENCER

Alan Turner can still hear the call to action.

Posted to a Canadian frigate in the North Atlantic late in the Second World War, the Royal Canadian Navy veteran and Belleville resident can still describe the scene that marked some of the most stressful moments of the war for him and HMCS Nene's 150 crew.

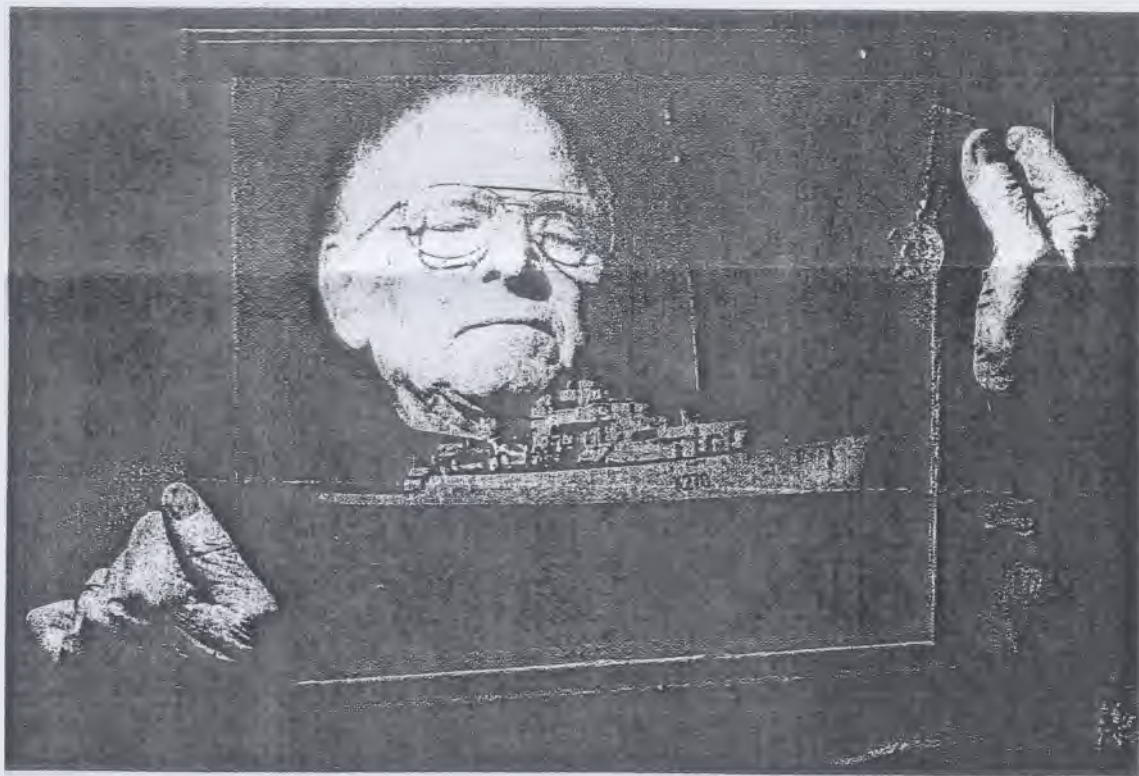
The 301-foot frigate was assigned to protect Allied supply convoys by sweeping for German submarines, mines, and other hazards in the icy waters. A former British vessel, the Nene and her crew went into action whenever sonar picked up trouble beneath the surface.

"The skipper would press a button," Vancouver-born Turner said in a Tuesday afternoon interview. The button on the ship's bridge caused alarm bells to ring throughout the ship, causing the crew to run to their "action stations" and prepare for battle.

Named for a British river, the Nene was part of Escort Group 9 (EG9). Also in the group were HMCS St. John, Monnow, Stormont, Port Colborne, with additional vessels rotating through the group.

Once the bells rang, EG9 would move into a criss-crossing pattern in front of their convoy, dropping depth charges and explosives dubbed "hedgehogs" in an attempt to either destroy the subs or force them to the surface.

Sailors would man the ships' guns in case subs surfaced, he said.



Navy veteran Alan Turner of Belleville is reflected in a wartime shot of HMCS Nene, the frigate on which he served in the North Atlantic. "If a country's worth living in, it's worth fighting for," he says.

INTELLIGENCER PHOTO BY LUKE HENDRY

"You'd see foam" spray out of the water if a sub was hit, he said.

"When she came up, the first thing you'd do was put as many rounds into her as you could," Turner recalled. "We'd pick up any survivors that came off the sub and take them ashore."

While other ships did participate in such scenes, Turner said the Nene's crew did fend off attacking German fighters but saw few subs or their destruction.

Instead, they waited out the tension as the warships moved through their patterns.

"It could take anywhere from half an hour to five days," Turner said.

"After action stations, then you start to shake. Before (the alert), you wouldn't," he said.

Turner said EG9 would lead con-

voys between Londonderry, Ireland to the Orkney Islands northeast of Britain. There the group met North American transports bringing supplies to Europe and Russia via Iceland. Surrounded by escorts from other groups, the convoys varied in size and carried goods such as oil, ammunition, grain, and vehicles.

At times, EG9 led the way to the bomb-devastated Russian port of Murmansk on the Barents Sea — a trip British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called "the gateway to hell."

"The North Atlantic and Murmansk was not a cruise," Turner said. "You were on edge all the time. You were always on alert, just waiting for the alarms to go."

"We had six meals a day — three down, three up," he joked. "We've seen waves 50, 60 feet high."

The Nene's skipper, Lt.-Cmdr. Eric

Shaw, enjoyed mutual respect with his crew, said Turner. He added his fellow sailors were also extremely close, and not merely because of their cramped quarters.

Together they persevered through terrifying moments, such as when the Nene broke down in the sub-ridden English Channel. Turner said other Allied ships scattered away from the crippled frigate, not wanting to give the Nazis yet another target.

"They had us cold turkey," Turner said of the enemy. "They could've taken us right out."

He said the crew sat in the middle of the ship, not knowing which direction an attacker might choose for such an easy attack. Miraculously, it never came.

Even in danger, said Turner, the crew remained tight.

"We knew that if anything hap-

pened, you've got all your buddies there, and they're going to help you."

He also could relate to the enemy personnel, he said.

"Half of them — they did their job, what they were told, and we did what we were told."

"There were a lot of atrocities on both sides," he added. "Canada, the U.S., Britain — you can't say we're all squeaky-clean."

Having served since 1940, Turner was discharged in 1945, but later returned to the armed forces. He was an air force firefighter and heavy equipment operator, retiring from CFB Trenton in 1972 at age 50. He retired as manager of General Bakeries at age 65.

Ten years ago, he and wife Marg tracked down his shipmates to form the HMCS Nene Family, a club of former crewmen and their families who

reunite when they can.

Like many veterans, Turner said he would enlist again.

"It's an experience that no kid today will ever have to go through," he said.

"I don't want anybody to ever have to go through the same thing. If I was asked to do it again, I sure as hell would, because this is a great country and I love every-thing about it."

"If a country's good enough to live in, it's good enough to fight for," Turner said.

Later generations don't know some of the realities of that conflict, he said.

"They don't know how close we came to losing the war," said Turner, recalling the advanced fighter jets and fast subs the Nazis had developed by 1945. "People don't realize where we'd be if we'd lost."