

# WWII veteran Henry Foster recalls events leading up to D-Day

BY IRENE SCHMIDT-ADENEY  
This week marks the 80th anniversary of the WWII D-Day landings at the beaches of Normandy, France on Tuesday, June 6th, 1944. It was the largest seaborne invasion in history and ultimately led to the liberation of Western Europe and defeat of the Nazi regime.

Henry Foster, 99, of Paris recently recalled events that led up to the landings. At the time, he was an 18-year old in the Royal Canadian Navy.

Born in Montreal in 1925 and the son of English immigrants, Foster enlisted at the beginning of 1943 after a particularly bad day in Grade 10.

According to Foster, the ‘good’ teachers had gone off to war or to help in the war effort and that left behind a ‘grumpy old man’ who probably didn’t want to be a teacher any more than Foster wanted to be his student. On Friday afternoon, the teacher remarked that the class was so dumb that they may as well enlist – and that’s exactly what Foster did.

After school, he headed off to the enlistment centre and to join the Navy, following in the family tradition. The recruiter said that at 17, he would need his father’s permission. Handing him a ‘chit’, the recruiter said Henry may as well have his medical check and pick up his kit, a uniform and a hammock. In perfect health, Henry headed home where he told his parents what happened.

“I probably won’t get called up for months,” said Foster. His father told him that the form said he was to report to the train station in two days.

By Sunday, Foster was on a train heading for Quebec City. A few months later, he was travelling across Canada to Esquimalt, British Columbia after volunteering to become a gunner.

“At the time, they were losing a terrible amount of ships,” said Foster. “But they were



Henry Foster's enlistment photo at age 17.

making a lot of ships, and they were looking for men to man them, and they weren’t too fussy at the time. You didn’t need much training.”

Four months after leaving his Grade 10 classroom, Foster was on a ship bound for Liverpool. He would spend the next three years with members of the Royal Canadian Navy who served on merchant ships, called DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships).

DEMS were constructed by the British in Canada for the Canada’s Merchant Navy. The ships were armed and carried supplies from Canada to ports in the U.K. and into war zones. There were typically eight members of the Royal Canadian Navy serving on each ship – six gunners who kept watch in teams of two, the gunlayer, and the “Peggy”.

“The gunlayer didn’t do a watch, he was in charge,” said Foster. “The odd man was what they called the Peggy. He did the cleaning up but didn’t have to do a watch.”

“I didn’t want to be a Peggy.”

Travelling in small convoys of around two dozen ships, or large convoys of up to 80 ships, they crossed the Atlantic from Liverpool to Montreal in the summer and St. John, New Brunswick in the winter. Foster made “too many trips to count” in a roundtrip journey that typically took 27 days to complete – 10 days each way, and one week to unload supplies.

DEMS functioned “as a deterrent” to the enemy so that food, supplies, vehicles, guns, and ammunition could be safely ferried across the Atlantic. In the larger convoys, an oil tanker could be placed in the middle for protection.

“When we were in a convoy you couldn’t fire on anything unless you got permission,” said Foster. “And usually there were so many ships together that they didn’t give permission. So we never fired.”

“They [German submarines] weren’t going to surface because they knew that our ships had guns, so they stayed under. And when they stayed under, then they weren’t accurate. The idea was to keep them down.”

In the months leading up to D-Day, 19-year old Foster had achieved the rank of Able Seaman, the rank below an officer. He did not play an active role in the actual invasion but knew well ahead “that something was up.”

“About four or five months before D-Day, every port was sealed off,” said Foster. “When we went into the pubs there was an unusual amount of soldiers, usually Americans.”

Instead of the usual wheat, frozen goods, and ammunition, the DEMS began to carry heavy equipment, tanks, and landing craft stacked one inside the other on the decks.

“That’s how we knew something was coming,” said Foster.



West River Lane in Paris is being renamed Henry Foster Lane in honour of WWII vet Henry Foster.

They were never told what was going to happen.

On D-Day, Foster was on a ship in the English Channel and said the sky was black with Allied aircraft.

“You couldn’t see the sky,” he said.

The planes could have been returning from their missions, obviously, the fighting was fierce.

“Some were limping and coughing at the rear of the pack and others had parts blown away,” said Foster.

After D-Day, Foster saw the first German V-1 rockets flying overhead.

Foster said that the rockets were engaged by Allied aircraft that “tried to shoot them down or tip them with their wings so they would drop into the sea.” If the rockets reached England “you would hear them stop, and then they would drop, mostly over London.”

After D-Day, Foster sailed in Italy for about nine months, travelling to various ports. Toward the end of 1944, the ship made an unusual delivery.

“We were anchored offshore in Italy and were delivering ammunition and Sten guns.” Sten guns were older model weapons, not used by soldiers.

Foster said that a group of Italian partisans appeared on shore, ranging in age from 16 to 80-years old and “rough-

looking”. They came on board to retrieve the weapons, bringing with them an ample supply of Chianti wine.

When the war ended Foster was in Halifax. By this time, he was a Leading Seaman and had signed up to serve in the Pacific. But that plan changed with the dropping of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima that ended the war.

Nineteen when the war ended, Foster was 20 when he resumed civilian life.

“For a young fella, it was exciting,” said Foster.

Foster returned to Montreal and made an unsuccessful attempt to finish Grade 10.

He went into the hosiery trade alongside his father, was married at 21 and had three daughters before moving to New Zealand for two years where he set up machines for a hosiery business. After returning to Montreal in 1963, the family made their final move, this time to Paris where his wife Sybil had family.

Brant County Council has approved changing the name of West River Lane in Paris to Henry Foster Street, recognizing the service of the WWII veteran who is in his 100th year. This is an appropriate location given that the Foster family lived near West River Lane when they made Paris their home over 50 years ago.

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